

# ASPERGER'S SYNDROME, NLD AND EMPLOYMENT

## 10 STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

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## Asperger's Syndrome, NLD & Employment: 10 Strategies for Success

Kevin sought coaching after losing his first full-time, post-college job after just 6 weeks. "What you need to succeed at work is so different than what you need to succeed at school," he said. "In school it was all about getting good grades, but at work it's about figuring out what people want."

Mike, on the other hand, started coaching to figure out why, during nearly two decades of employment in the high technology field, he continues to have conflicts with supervisors and colleagues. "I do exactly what they tell me to do, but still it's wrong," he exclaimed at our first session, "what does everyone else know that I don't?!"

Alice described her 15-year writing career as a "trail of tears" littered with one job loss after another. "Employers tell me that my writing skills are excellent," she explained, "but that co-workers find me rude and hard to work with. I try to be friendly and helpful but somehow it backfires."

Stories like these are exceedingly common among adults with Asperger's Syndrome and Nonverbal Learning Disorder (NLD). Individuals enter the workforce with solid academic credentials and above-average (or even exceptional) intelligence yet can't seem to find the right niche or maintain steady, rewarding employment.

Although there is no specific formula or set of instructions that will guarantee job success, there are strategies that increase your chances of finding and keeping rewarding work. Ten of those strategies are presented in this guide. They are based on the chal-

*NOTE: The names and identifying details of clients mentioned in this guide have been changed to protect their identity.*

lenges that occur most frequently among the people who come to me for career coaching. Not every strategy will apply to you, but chances are at least one or two will.

The best way to use this guide is to first identify the strategies that apply to your particular employment situation and then choose one or two to work on at a time. They are loosely ordered beginning with topics concerning career choice and getting started on the job and progress to addressing common problems. If you are like most people with Asperger's or NLD, you will need some help with applying a strategy to your personal situation. This can come from a trained coach or other professional or a family member, mentor, colleague or teacher. Finding a neurotypical<sup>1</sup> person you trust to "translate" a concept into a practical action plan will bring faster and better results than going it alone!

## THE 10 STRATEGIES FOR EMPLOYMENT SUCCESS ARE:

Strategy #1: Choose Your Career Wisely

Strategy #2: Be a Team Player

Strategy #3: Find a Work Buddy

Strategy #4: Clarify Expectations

Strategy #5: Ask for Help

Strategy #6: Manage Anger and Stress

Strategy #7: Explain Unusual Behavior

Strategy #8: Look at the Big Picture

Strategy #9: Be Proactive, Not Reactive

Strategy #10: Disclose Your Asperger's or NLD

## Strategy #1: Choose Your Career Wisely

Career satisfaction is dependent on a number of factors including your interest in a particular field, possessing the necessary talent, skills and education to be employable, the availability of jobs, good wages, opportunities for advancement, the right work environment, etc. Thorough research into a field can steer you away from occupations that aren't a match.

Kathy, for example, wanted to be a teacher because she enjoyed playing with her young cousins. During her college internships she had a very difficult time managing a classroom of young children and talking with their parents, and concluded that early childhood education was not the right career choice.

It was after Scott earned a degree in anthropology that he realized how very few job openings there are in field and that most teaching positions require a doctorate. The jobs that he did get only lasted a few months, largely because Scott was easily overwhelmed and needed very explicit directions that his employers couldn't provide. During our coaching sessions we looked at Scott's other skills and interests. He decided to pursue a technical writing career because he could work alone for most of the day and would have very specific project guidelines to follow.

These stories illustrate the importance of doing thorough research before investing a lot of time and money training for a career that doesn't match your abilities. While it's true that sometimes the only way to know if a career will work out is to try it, there are still things that you can do to increase the odds of finding one that is interesting, achievable and rewarding.

For most individuals with Asperger's Syndrome and NLD the work *environment* is equally if not more important than specific job tasks. *Preferences* for neurotypicals (quiet office, routine, relaxed pace) might be *necessities* for you!

Learn as much as you can about the environment in a particular industry and at a specific company. Computer technology, for instance, is a volatile sector and start-up companies in particular tend to operate under tight deadlines. Some of my clients who

<sup>1</sup> The term "neurotypical" is widely used in the autism and NLD communities to refer to people with normal neurological development.

had trouble meeting the demands of high tech were able to transfer their skills to less pressured jobs in established corporations.

The same job can be quite different from one company to another. Corporate libraries, for instance, are not as hectic as public libraries located in large cities. News reporters for daily papers write on much shorter deadlines than feature writers working for

magazines. Serving customers at the post office involves a much more structured and predictable routine than serving customers at a busy restaurant.

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*Your career evaluation should also include things like level of social interaction on the job, pace of the workday, etc.*

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Talk to people who work in a field to learn what their jobs and working conditions are like (see Appendix A for how to set up informational interviews).

Professional trade associations and trade magazines are also good sources of information and con-

tacts. Volunteering and job shadowing (following someone at their job for several hours or a day) are excellent ways to get a first-hand look at what a job is like.

Carefully evaluate whether your talents and skills really match the career that you're considering. Look at your strengths as well as your limitations. Rick thought that his passion for baseball qualified him for a job managing travel logistics for a team. He soon learned that the position required a level of executive functioning (organizing, scheduling, budgeting, etc.) that he simply could not manage. Susan discovered that becoming a speech-language pathologist required proficiency in advanced math that she simply cannot master.

Your career evaluation should also include things like level of social interaction on the job, pace of the workday, amount of supervision, how much routine, etc. And don't overlook practical considerations such as the availability of jobs where you live, commuting time and cost, full- versus part-time employment and other ancillary items.

Be flexible and creative by researching the broadest range of occupations that will utilize your skills and interests. Teachers, for example, can work with children, adults or animals and apply their craft in academic settings, trade schools, corporations, adult education programs and many other venues. Writing instructional manuals or textbooks is a form of teaching as is answering questions about highly technical products in sales situations. Before settling on or eliminating a career choice, brainstorm your options with a career coach, mentor, family member or teacher.

Do not embark on a costly training or educational program without researching the job outlook! Some of my clients hold degrees in highly competitive fields with low or no projected growth. Several have been forced to take "survival jobs" to pay their bills. Two excellent (and free) resources for researching prospects for employment are The Occupational Outlook Handbook (<http://www.bls.gov/oco/>) and O\*Net (Occupational Information Network) OnLine (<http://online.onetcenter.org>).

## Strategy #2: Be a Team Player

Being a "team player" is an almost ubiquitous job requirement that creates a big hurdle for many people with Asperger's Syndrome and NLD.

The essence of being a team player is working cooperatively with others toward a common goal. This means sharing ideas and resources, being respectful of opinions that differ from your own, and being willing to compromise and follow directives of the group leader. Good team players focus on achieving the overall goal even if they don't agree with every step of the process.

Discussing strategies, reaching consensus and keeping others informed are all part of effective teamwork as Allan discovered the hard way. Allan presumed that colleagues understood that the extra time he put into an emergency task meant that his design project would be delayed. The members of his project group, however, figured that everything was on schedule because Allan didn't say otherwise. At his annual review, Allan was cited for not communicating well with his team.

People want to work with others who are enthusiastic about the task at hand. Be aware of your body language as it might send unintended messages to others. Neurotypicals will perceive you as not being a team player if you: fold your arms across your chest ...look at the floor or ceiling during a meeting...slump in your chair...don't smile. Other behaviors that separate you from the group are: interrupting...ending conversations by abruptly walking away...answering most questions with "I don't know"...talking too much.

It is critical to listen to and respect the ideas of other people – whether you agree with those ideas or not. Peter realized that he was alienating colleagues by making sarcastic remarks about what he considered to be their "shallow" corporate expressions. Now if someone in a team meeting talks about "creating synergies," Peter responds, "Here's how I think we can get the most out of our combined efforts..."

If you do disagree with a colleague, avoid making statements that imply judgment such as, "That's dumb"... "I can't believe you said that"... "Anyone can see that it won't work." Instead state your

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opinion using neutral, non-judgmental statements like, "I see the situation differently"... "I hear what you're saying, but my experience is..." ... "I don't agree; let me explain why."

Should you find yourself resisting or challenging the ideas of other people most of the time, then you are not being a team player and your co-workers probably perceive you as someone who is hard to get along with.

Team players make time to interact with others, even if it is exhausting. Some jobs require significantly more collaboration than others so learn what is expected and be honest about how much contact you can tolerate. Observe how and when your colleagues interact. Is there social banter at meetings or is it down to

business right away? Do most people eat lunch at their desks or as a group in the lunch room? Do your co-workers socialize outside the office?

### Strategy #3: Find a Work Buddy

A "work buddy" is a colleague, preferably a peer (not a supervisor or human resources representative), who can help you navigate the myriad of questions and concerns that arise when you're on the job. In some cases, this is a formally established partnership (e.g. mentor, designated trainer) while in others it is an informal relationship with someone you like and trust.

A work buddy can give you ideas about how to improve your job performance and efficiency; explain office politics; introduce you to other people in the organization; explain or demonstrate a task that you don't understand; and show you "the way things get done" in your company.

You do not need to disclose your Asperger's Syndrome or NLD to your work buddy. This person can be treated simply as a helpful colleague who can answer questions like, "How do you handle the month-end closing?" or "I need to save some time on the documentation; any ideas?"

Paula, for example, was overwhelmed by the weekly volume of patients that she had to manage in her nursing job. She couldn't judge whether she was processing paperwork too slowly or simply had too much to do. Paula asked her "buddy," a fellow nurse, to review her case-management methods. The co-worker showed Paula how to save almost four hours of administrative time per week and provided a "reality check" in acknowledging that she, too, was overwhelmed by patient volume.

Tom could not figure out how long his projects should take and also worried about his tendency to anger co-workers with blunt remarks. He decided to disclose his Asperger's Syndrome to a peer who promised to keep the information confidential. Tom's peer guided his project planning process and told him when he had inadvertently offended people so that Tom could apologize right away.

## Strategy #4: Clarify Expectations

Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome and NLD are often confused about whether or not they are meeting an employer's expectations. The individual may guess (often incorrectly) about what should be done, or become paralyzed with anxiety and do nothing.

The best way to clarify expectations is to ask your supervisor for feedback about your performance at regular intervals. Depending on your job, this feedback can be once per week, once per month or even less often. Position your request in a *positive* way by saying something like, "I want to be sure that I'm doing a good job and meeting your expectations. Can we set up weekly meetings to review my projects?"

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Observing your peers can also provide information about expectations. Anna noticed that when there were few customers in the store where she worked, her fellow sales associates gathered unsold clothing from the dressing rooms and returned it to racks on the sales floor. You can also ask a co-worker if you are unsure about how to do something or what to do next.

If your supervisor mentions the same performance issue to you more than twice, or if you are consistently re-doing assignments, the chances are that you are not meeting an expectation. In this case, be direct in explaining your difficulty. For example, you can say, "I'm having trouble understanding what you're looking for. Can we review this outline?" or "I'm falling behind and need help to figure out how to streamline my process." You can also ask for examples, a prioritized project list, check list or additional training.

If you receive a formal warning to improve or have been placed on probation it means that the situation is critical and you need to

take action. First, evaluate whether you are able to meet the job requirements or believe that you can meet them with an accommodation. In the latter case, the best option might be to disclose your Asperger's or NLD to your human resources department and make a formal accommodation request. (See Strategy #9: Be Proactive, Not Reactive and Strategy #10: Disclose Your Asperger's or NLD for more information.)

## Strategy #5: Ask for Help

Asking for help is challenging for many individuals with Asperger's Syndrome and NLD. Some are reluctant to raise questions out of fear that they will appear "stupid" or in the mistaken belief that once hired, they are expected to know exactly how to handle every aspect of the job. Others are determined to solve a problem themselves even when their solutions aren't working.

Knowing when to ask for help involves judgment based on the situation. First get clear on what your difficulty is. Is information being presented too quickly for you to fully process? Are you receiving instructions in a format that you can't follow or remember? (Many people with Asperger's and NLD need written directions due to poor short-term memory.) Are you having trouble concentrating? Is this a novel situation that you haven't encountered before?

Next think about the problem within the larger context of your job to get an idea of the best way to handle it. For example, if you have forgotten how to use a piece of equipment or where to file a report, the question can likely be answered by a co-worker. If you know that you can't make a critical deadline or are thoroughly confused about a project, your supervisor needs to know.

Sometimes neurotypicals will be surprised that you are asking a question about something that is obvious to them. If someone says to you, "You should know that," or "It's obvious," you can politely say, "Actually, it's not obvious to me and I want to do a good job. Would you explain what needs to be done?"

## Strategy #6: Manage Anger and Stress

Yelling, slamming your fist on your desk, bursting into tears and other forms of emotional “melt down” will damage your credibility and will not be tolerated in most organizations. It is important to plan a coping strategy in advance so that when the inevitable frustrations occur, you can respond appropriately and professionally.

The first step is to become aware of when you are feeling angry or stressed so that you can react before your emotions are out of control. Many people notice that their bodies send different signals at various stages of upset. You might notice, for example, that under mild to moderate stress your shoulder muscles tighten and under severe stress that your heart beats quickly and your ears ring. Anger might start as a tense feeling in the gut and progress to a clenched jaw and flushed face.

Pay attention to whether certain situations or people trigger strong emotional reactions. Nancy felt anxious during weekly meetings with her manager. David got frustrated and angry when meetings interrupted his workday. You may not be able to change a particular situation, but you can change the way that you react to it.

The next step to managing anger and stress is to have a system in place that will calm you down. Often, simply removing yourself from the stressful situation (by going to the rest room, taking a brief walk outside, etc.) will relieve the tension and allow you to respond more objectively. Deep breathing can be amazingly effective for relaxing both the muscles and the mind. One deep breathing method is to inhale slowly to the count of seven, hold the breath for a count of three, and then slowly exhale to the count of seven.

Self-talk is another popular strategy for creating inner calm. Select one or two statements that give you a sense of peace and repeat them silently to yourself when you're under pressure. Examples of statements are *I am calm and objective ...I can handle this...I can figure this out.*

The key is not to react impulsively when your emotions are strong because you will very likely say or do something that you will later regret. In the neurotypical workplace being able to control your emotions is as important as the talents and skills that you bring to the job.

## Strategy #7: Explain Unusual Behavior

It is my experience that most of the employment problems encountered by people with Asperger's Syndrome and NLD fall into two categories: communication difficulties and organizational (executive functioning) deficits.

Because there is a lack of awareness about Asperger's and NLD in the business community, the communication problems are usually treated as attitude or behavior problems. Executive functioning problems (particularly those related to time management, prioritizing and short-term memory) are attributed to laziness, inattention and not trying hard enough.

Learning how to explain and neutralize unexpected or unusual behaviors makes it less likely that you will be accused of slovenly work habits.

Let people know that you have a difficulty or limitation, particularly if it is communication-related, so that they won't take it personally. There are times when you can explain your needs and make accommodation requests without disclosing your Asperger's or NLD. Here are some examples of simple, well-worded requests:

### •Organizational (executive functioning) difficulties

- “I'm having a hard time visualizing the finished product; what should it look like?”
- “Here's an outline—is this what you had in mind?”

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*Communication problems are usually treated as attitude or behavior problems.*

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- “When are you expecting the first draft?”
- “Can you give me an example of what you mean?”

- **Confusion or overwhelm**

- “I’m getting really overwhelmed by all of this information. Can we take a break?”
- “I don’t understand. Can you tell me specifically what needs to happen?”
- “Can you show me what you want?”
- “Which item is the priority?”

- **Social/communication problems**

- “Sometimes when I’m concentrating, I forget to say hello. Please don’t take it personally.”
- “People tell me that I look angry when I’m lost in thought. Have you noticed that?”
- “It’s hard for me to look at you and listen at the same time, so I’m going to focus on taking notes so I don’t miss anything.”
- “I have a tendency to take things very literally; let me know when I do that.”

- **Visual or auditory sensitivities**

- “I have a photo-sensitivity to fluorescent lights and need to use a desk lamp instead.”
- “I get very distracted by office noise and wear headphones so I can concentrate.”
- “I’m having a hard time concentrating with all of the activity near my desk; can I move to a space away from the hall?”

Remember that an employer wants you to succeed and will make modifications and adjustments as long as the request is reasonable (see Strategy #10: Disclose Your Asperger’s or NLD for more information about reasonable accommodation requests).

## Strategy # 8: Look at the Big Picture

If you’re like most people with Asperger’s and NLD, your focus is often on the details of a project or situation and not on the big picture. There is nothing wrong with focusing on details—doing so can result in accurate, high quality work, or even genuine innovations. Temple Grandin, for example, revolutionized livestock handling by noticing details of animal behavior that other people missed. However, making details your exclusive focus can result in poor decision-making that doesn’t address the real objective of your job.

For example, Adam received high praise for his technical skill in animating video games. However, because he never actually *played* the games, he often misunderstood what the producers were looking for. By focusing only on the technical details of creating cutting-edge visuals, Adam missed the primary goal of his work, which was to create graphics for a mass-market product.

Similarly, application programmer Mike was a master at writing top-quality computer code that could address an array of possible future customer demands. He became increasingly frustrated when his supervisor pushed him to write “quick and dirty” code that would answer current product specifications only. Mike missed the overall goal, which was to get the new product ready for shipment so that revenue from sales could be realized in the third quarter.

To get a broader perspective, think about *why* you are doing something and how your tasks contribute to the final product or service. Once Adam understood that the goal was to create a popular game that would sell millions of copies, he was able to satisfy his producers with graphics that appealed to a broad audience of players.

Thinking in black and white terms also obscures the big picture and may keep you from meeting productivity requirements. “Black and white” thinking is when you perceive something in absolute terms: right *or* wrong; good *or* bad; yes *or* no. More often than not a situation is not entirely one way or the other.

Donald's supervisor explained that the deadline for completing updates to client records was 4:30pm each day. Donald interpreted the deadline in black and white terms, equating good performance with handing in the updates at 4:30, period. On some days, though, he rushed to make the deadline without checking his work, and was upset that his supervisor considered the errors to be a performance issue. The big picture? *Client records must be accurately updated by 4:30pm each day.*

The literal thinking that is so characteristic of Asperger's Syndrome can make it difficult to reconcile a stated objective such as "create a top-quality widget," with an unstated objective, "keep the production costs low." If this is a problem for you, try putting the words you hear into the context of a situation.

Alex believed that he was doing exactly what his boss told him to do when he spent nearly half an hour answering questions from a customer at the hardware store. However, it was a busy Saturday morning and Alex had left a long line of frustrated customers waiting at the cash register. Thinking later about the context—lots of customers who needed attention—helped Alex come up with some better options. In the future he would either ask the store manager to assist a patron with lots of questions, or politely ask that patron to wait until the cash register line was cleared.

## Strategy #9: Be Proactive, Not Reactive

Adults with Asperger's Syndrome and NLD frequently fail to recognize the warning signs that they are falling short of an employer's expectations. Sometimes this is because of problems recognizing non-verbal cues, such as an annoyed look on a supervisor's face. Other times, unsure of how to address a situation, the individual takes no action at all.

Many of the strategies this guide can help you be proactive at your job, as long as you recognize the seriousness of a problem and take appropriate action. Listed here, in order from least to most serious, are some common problems and suggestions for pro-actively addressing them.

1. *I am anxious/unsure about my performance*
  - Ask your supervisor for feedback at regular intervals
  - Talk to co-workers about process, procedures and workflow
  - Ask questions to clarify assignments
  - Request written directions, check lists, examples
2. *I miss deadlines regularly; work very long hours; am confused about what is expected*
  - Ask a co-worker ("work buddy") how they handle tasks and for ideas to increase your efficiency
  - Review your tasks: are there things you need to stop doing or do less of?
  - Meet with supervisor to clarify priorities, specific productivity requirements and deadlines
  - Ask for assistance with specific difficulties
3. *Supervisor has mentioned the same performance issue more than twice; I am consistently re-doing assignments*
  - Discuss the performance issue with supervisor, review your process, make accommodation request if necessary
  - Evaluate whether the particular job, career or company is the right match
  - Change the way that you handle the situation; get help with this, if necessary
4. *Supervisor met with me about performance problems; written warning to improve*
  - Formally disclose your disability to supervisor and human resources department
  - Make a formal accommodation request
  - Engage professional to intervene with the employer on your behalf

5. *I have had a formal disciplinary action/ been placed on probation*

- Formally disclose your disability to supervisor and human resources department
- Make a formal accommodation request
- Ask about transferring to a different job or department, if applicable
- Begin looking for another job outside the company, especially if you think that you are unable to handle your current position
- Engage a professional to intervene on my behalf

## Strategy #10: Disclose Your Asperger's or NLD

Clients often ask me whether they should disclose their disability to an employer and my answer is, "It depends." My approach is to weigh the many factors that affect employment outcomes and develop a personalized plan for each person.

Disclosing when you receive a job offer enables you to request accommodations from day one, which could increase your chances of success. People are usually much more patient when they know that someone has a disability, and therefore likely to tolerate longer learning curves and more mistakes in the beginning. The risk is that the job offer could be retracted (without revealing the real reason).

Disclosing when problems arise on the job gives you a chance to explain the reason for unusual behaviors or performance shortfalls. Disclosing a disability compels the employer, under the Americans with Disabilities Act, to make reasonable accommodations to enable a qualified employee to perform essential functions of his or her job. Examples of reasonable accommodations are things like providing written instructions, allowing the use of headphones to block office noise, a modified training program, flexible scheduling, etc.

Disclosure also offers the employer a chance to work with you so that you can meet performance requirements. Losing an employee

through termination or voluntary resignation costs the employer an average of 1.5 times an employee's annual salary in recruiting fees, training and lost productivity. Unless you are clearly unable to perform the requirements of your job, the majority of employers are eager to find ways to retain you.

If you decide to disclose it is critical to explain how you believe that your challenges can be resolved. Saying something like, "I have Asperger's Syndrome and can't multi-task" is a poor approach because it puts the burden on your 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 its cause, or all of the ways that someone can be affected. Instead, summarize the condition in 1 or 2 sentences, state your challenges and list the specific accommodations that you believe will address them.

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."

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*Saying "I have Asperger's, and can't multi-task" is a poor approach.*

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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."

Disclosure does not guarantee employment success, but it has worked quite well for a number of people. With the right accom-

modation plan, clients have retained their jobs or have transferred to more appropriate positions within the company. Some who lost their jobs were able to gain valuable information about the kinds of occupation that *will* be a good fit.

For more information about whether, when and how to disclose at work, visit the Forward Motion Coaching web site ([www.ForwardMotion.info](http://www.ForwardMotion.info)) and request a free copy of my guide, *Workplace Disclosure, Strategies for Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome and NLD*.

## Final Thoughts

The most successful people I know with Asperger's Syndrome and NLD have found, usually through trial and error, jobs and careers that play to their strengths and minimize their weaknesses. They have realistic expectations both of themselves and their jobs. If something isn't working, they try something else. They don't try to become neurotypical; they find ways to function effectively in the neurotypical world.

If you have lost one or multiple jobs, try to learn as much as you can about what went wrong. Ask your supervisor for direct feedback about what you need to work on. If you are too upset to do this on the day that you are let go, make contact a day or two later. Some of my clients have retained me as their advocate to speak with employers to clarify why a job didn't work out. There are no guarantees that a former employer will talk to you or a third party, but it doesn't hurt to ask. Former colleagues might also be able to shed some light on where your performance was lacking.

Listen to feedback with an open mind and do not try to justify your point of view or argue that you should not have been let go. The purpose of feedback is to learn. If you hear the same thing from two or more people, then it is probably a problem that you need to address.

Figure out which limitations you can work *on* and which ones you have to work *around*. For example, you can work on improving

your social skills but slow processing speed is something that you need to compensate for. Some of the clients I've worked with have struggled for years in jobs or industries that simply are not suitable for their abilities. If this is happening to you, find someone who can help you figure out other occupations where you can use your skills. There might even be a more suitable job in your current company.

If you have been unemployed for a long period of time, or underemployed in job that does not reflect your intellect or abilities, consider re-training for a career in a growing field. You do not necessarily need a four-year or graduate degree to do this. There are many certificate and vocational programs that can qualify you for a job in a year or less.

In the right job with the right support, individuals with Asperger's and NLD make valuable contributions to their employers and develop successful and rewarding careers. I hope that the information in this guide will help you do the same!

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## ABOUT BARBARA BISSONNETTE AND FORWARD MOTION COACHING

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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 information 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* and publishes the monthly *Asperger's & NLD Career Letter*. All are available at no charge by visiting the Forward Motion Coaching Web site at [www.ForwardMotion.info](http://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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## FIND OUT MORE ABOUT COACHING AND ADVOCACY SERVICES WITH A FREE CONSULTATION.

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To find out if coaching is right for you, or to discuss advocacy services to bridge the gap between you and your employer, call or write to schedule a free 1/2-hour telephone session. Call 978-298-5186 or email [Barbara@ForwardMotion.info](mailto:Barbara@ForwardMotion.info).

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

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## APPENDIX A

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### Informational Interviewing for Career Research

Informational interviewing is one of the most effective ways to research a career. It is not a job interview; it is a meeting with someone who is employed in the field that you are considering. It gives you a chance to ask questions about what a particular job or industry is really like, and get "inside information" that you won't find in books.

Here is a 6-step process for setting up and conducting an informational interview:

#### Step 1. Figure out what you want to learn.

- Are you researching a career or an industry or both?
- Are you seeking ideas about a different line of work in the same industry?
- Do you need advice about how to transfer your skills into a new field?

#### Step 2. Find the names of people who can help you.

Trade associations, trade magazines and professional conferences are excellent places to find names of people in a particular industry. You can also browse the Web sites of specific companies and local business organizations (such as a Chamber of Commerce). Friends, family members, former co-workers, college alumni offices, and other personal contacts may also know of individuals you can contact to request a meeting. Be specific when you ask others for contact names (e.g. "I'm looking for someone who can help me learn about Web development jobs").

#### Step 3. Request an informational interview.

Once you have identified some contact names, the next step is to

send each person a letter or email to ask for a meeting. Explain why you are making contact and whether you were referred by a common acquaintance: “I want to learn about career opportunities in product marketing and Paul Smith thinks that you can give me some advice.” Or, “I noticed that you are speaking on the topic of computer forensics at the National Forensics Professionals Conference. I’m exploring computer forensics as a career and am eager to hear your suggestions about how to break into the field.”

Include two or three sentences about your work experience or education (“For the past 3 years, I’ve worked in the product development department of Widget Works Computers...”). End with a call to action: “I’d like to arrange a brief meeting to get your ideas about how I can apply my skills in product marketing. I hope you won’t mind a call next week to set up a time. If it’s more convenient you can reach me at 555-234-5678.” Include a copy of your resume with the letter.

Keep a list or spreadsheet of everyone you contact, including the person’s title, company, address, telephone number and email. Keep copies of your letters, too, so that you’ll remember where you got the contact name and what information you requested. You will also use this information when you make follow up calls.

#### **Step 4. Follow up with a telephone call.**

You will get much better results if you proactively follow up your letter or email with a phone call asking for a meeting. Keep your message brief—four to five sentences or about 30 seconds—and practice it enough so that you are comfortable but not so much that you sound over-rehearsed. If you are nervous about calling, edit your original letter into a script that you can use on the telephone.

If you get voice mail, leave a message and include, if possible, one two times for the person to call you back. The times you suggest should be within regular business hours (e.g. “You can reach me between 10:00 and 11:30 tomorrow morning or Wednesday after 3:00pm”). If you don’t receive a reply after three or four days, call again or send an email.

The general rule of thumb is if, after three attempts, you don’t get a response, you should presume that the individual cannot meet with you and stop contacting them. Do not get discouraged; not everyone will say “yes.”

#### **Step 5. Prepare for your meeting as if it was a job interview.**

- Research the individual and his or her company beforehand.
- Write down and practice the questions you plan to ask.
- Pay careful attention to your grooming and wear professional clothing that’s clean and pressed.
- Bring extra copies of your resume.
- Arrive on time and greet the person you’re meeting with in a professional manner—establish eye contact, smile, shake hands, and introduce yourself (“Hello, I’m John Jones, it’s nice to meet you”).

Open-ended queries yield better results than questions that can be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” Here are some examples of open-ended questions:

- *What is a typical day like in your job?*
- *How much interaction do you have with others?*
- *What surprised you about this job/career/organization/industry?*
- *How did you get your job?*
- *What does it take to be successful in this job/career/organization/industry?*
- *What kind of education/experience is needed for this work?*
- *How did you advance in your career?*
- *What do you think the job prospects are for someone entering this field?*
- *Which industry associations are you active in?*
- *Who else do you think I should talk to?*

Respect the time of the people you meet with. Plan on a 1/2-hour meeting and on asking six to seven questions. If you are uncertain about how much time has gone by, you can ask something like, "Do you have time for two more questions?" Ask for the person's business card before you leave.

**Step 6. Thank the person you met with.**

Refer back to your contact list or spreadsheet and add notes about what happened at your meeting. Don't skip this step. You may want to renew contact with certain individuals in the future. Always send a letter or email to thank the individual for his or her time. The thank you letter should refer to specifics of your meeting: "Thank you for giving me the Web site of the regional association chapter. I'll plan on attending their next meeting;" ... "I will contact John Jones, Sarah Smith and Beth Lewis this week and let you know what happens;" ... "I appreciate the article about Web development and will look into the certification program."