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essential reading for those who care

Autism World



Magazine

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ONE

Future Employment: Part 5: Perceptions



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This part five of the future of autistic employment explores lack of self belief as one of the causes behind the AJ Drexel Autism Institute research findings that individuals with autism spectrum conditions have worse employment and independent living outcomes than people with other disabilities.

Autism awareness has been one of the catch-cries of the community for several years. In fact, the campaign has been so successful that there are now very few people in Australia that are unaware of autism. However, community understanding of the autism spectrum is sadly lacking.

When an individual is confronted with a concept that they don't understand, the first impulse is to find a point of reference. Some people will do this by researching articles, posts, books and other sources to gain greater understanding of the concept. Others will rely on their own experiences to fill the gaps. Then there are the people between these two groups.

Unfortunately, when we have an academic community that tends to focus on the "problems" with autism and a media that has a drive for sensation and for bathing in negative emotion, the information encountered by most of the above people is predominantly focused on the "can't do" view of the autism spectrum.



Therefore, some autistic individuals who choose to disclose their diagnosis are treated with pity and limitations by others who genuinely believe that the autistic person is not able to achieve the successes enjoyed by their neurotypical counterparts. On the other hand, should the individual choose non-disclosure, they often receive uninformed and unfair judgment from society peers that likewise impedes a path to success.

It is possible that many business managers will not take the “risk” of employing a disclosed autistic individual because of the belief that the effort required to manage and coach that individual will be too much of a strain on the human resources of the company.

All of the above occurs because we as a society have awareness of autism without a clear understanding of what it means to be autistic. So where do you start the process of gaining understanding? By finding out about autism and Asperger syndrome from those that live it, not from those that study it.

Put aside anything you think you know about autism and approach the individual with an open mind and open eyes. Another necessary piece of advice can be drawn from Professor Stephen Shore of Adelphi University, who says that if you have met one person with autism, you have met one person with autism. In other words, each person that you meet on the autism spectrum is unique.



Picture courtesy: Danny O'Connor <http://docart.bigcartel.com>

see the autistic world
through open eyes

Furthermore, the reason in my opinion that research findings about autism appear to conflict each other is that each research team is exploring different aspects of the autism spectrum. So why would we as a society want to define autism in singular terms?

There are many websites dedicated to listing famous celebrities and historical figures who either have a confirmed diagnosis of autism spectrum or who were believed to be on the spectrum. Included in that list are Albert Einstein, Bill Gates, Marilyn Monroe, Susan Boyle, Temple Grandin, Michael Palin, and many others.

Fictional media celebrates undiagnosed autistic characters such as Sherlock Holmes (BBC's Sherlock), Doctor Temperance Brennan (Bones), the Vulcan race (Star Trek franchise), the characters in the Big Bang Theory (except Penny) and so on.

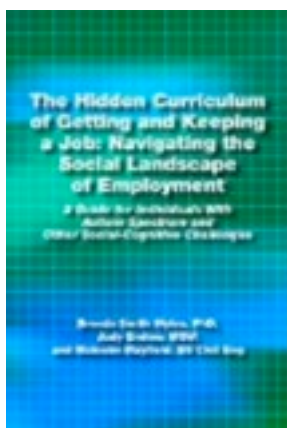
My firm belief is that there is more "can do" in the autism spectrum than "can't do". Will you let your belief propagate the negative perception of the autism spectrum? Or will you put aside the opinions of others and see the autistic world through open eyes. I choose the latter.

I look at autism through the eyes of living on the spectrum. I also grew up without the label and therefore the opinions of others to define me. I therefore define myself by my beliefs and by my deeds as did many of the people in the list referred to above. I am autistic and I am honoured to be so.

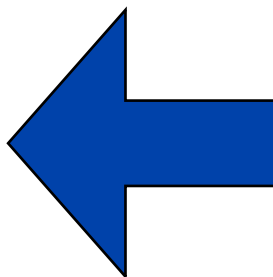
Allow the label to be one of empowerment. Then we are one step closer to a brighter future of employment for autistic and neurotypical alike.

Part six of this series next month will address lack of training.

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