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## Managerial Aspects of Employing People with Asperger Syndrome in Poland

**Abstract:** The article presents managerial and organizational aspects of employing people with Asperger Syndrome in enterprises in Poland. In the research process, the author conducted theoretical studies in the field of law, management and psychology (applicable legal acts, subject literature, specialist articles, reports and studies), case studies and direct interviews. On this basis, the author presented recommendations in the field of choosing a profession for people with Asperger Syndrome (AS), as well as requirements for recruitment, selection and organization of work. In particular, the author formulated recommendations for employers intending to employ individuals with AS.

**Key words:** Asperger Syndrome, human capital management, employment

### Introduction

In 2001, the Wired magazine published an article that stated that companies located in Silicon Valley employ a lot of people with Asperger Syndrome. At the same time, it was suggested that in addition to many undeniable advantages, it is also a threat, because the population of people with AS may be too large and have a growing tendency [Silberman 2001]. On the other hand, the author also presented other reasons for this situation, that is: better diagnostic methods, more detailed statistics on the occurrence of this disease in the US, or separation of AS from autism, etc. However, the author also quoted the following words by Rollens (former secretary of the California Senate and cofounder of the MIND Institute): "Anyone who says this epidemic is due to better diagnostics, has his head in the sand" [Silberman 2001]. Ten years later, Robertson compared an association between Asperger's and the "geek culture" common in companies of Sili-

con Valley. The author noticed that although there are many similarities between these behaviours, there are scientific grounds for undermining the thesis formulated in the Silberman's article. Robertson listed that: 1) education, not the type of profession is the variable key – regions with higher concentrations of autism are ones where the parents are more educated; 2) mothers in high tech jobs were slightly more likely (6.7% vs. 4.0%) to have children with autism than mothers with similar educations working in different industries; 3) no evidence was found that fathers in high tech fields had a greater likelihood of having children with autism; 4) parents who have children later in life are at a higher risk of having children with developmental delays [Robertson 2011]. However, the author did not present strong arguments for falsifying Silberman's thesis.

The upward trends and high dynamics of the occurrence of an increasing number of people with AS have also been noticed in Poland. Therefore, it was decided to investigate the problem of functioning of people with AS on the Polish labour market, especially in the context of forecasts regarding changes in the so-called "Future professions". For several years now, not only on the Polish labour market, the most sought-after specialists are programmers, IT specialists (especially in the field of systems security) as well as process, quality and R & D (research and development) engineers [Szewczak 2016; Nowak 2017].

The aim of the paper is therefore to draw attention to the existence of people with AS in the Polish society as an attractive group of employees, but still not fully utilized. Therefore, the article presents special requirements for effective management of people with AS. The issue of the article is important especially for two reasons. First of all, the number of people with AS increases and may soon be a noticeable group in society, and therefore the awareness and knowledge on this subject must increase, especially among HR managers, coaches and other HR specialists. Secondly, there is no systemic solutions in Poland regarding the development of competences and the promotion of employment of people with AS. Therefore, it is necessary to start a social debate, scientific work and implementation of practical solutions in the above-mentioned range.

The article consists of three parts. In the first one, a short description of AS was presented as a disease and the situation of people with AS on the Polish labour market was described. In the second part, the scope of research was characterized. In the third part, based on the conducted research, selected guidelines for managers, HR specialists and other people cooperating with the AS or intending to start cooperation with them were presented, as well as the prospects of employing people with AS in the context of modern forms of employment.

The content of the article is to draw the attention of theoreticians and practitioners of management to the problem of AS functioning on the Polish labour market and to encourage various associations to take initiatives in this area.

## **Theoretical background**

The name of the syndrome comes from Johann “Hans” Friedrich Karl Asperger, Austrian paediatrician and medical theorist who as a first noticed a psychological disorder which he termed “autistic psychopathy”. In 1944, he described a pattern of children behaviour that included “a lack of empathy, little ability to form friendships, one-sided conversation, intense absorption in a special interest, and clumsy movements” [Asperger 1944]. Moreover, the scientist called his patients as “little professors,” because of their ability to talk about their favourite subject in great detail. He was convinced that AS children can increase their unusual skills or interests and became successful employees. Unfortunately, Asperger’s work was not developed until beginning of the 1980s, but later, due to his earlier work was named after him.

For the first time, Asperger syndrome was included as a formal diagnosis in 1990 at International Classification of Diseases [ICD-10] published by WHO. According to current edition of ICD-10, AS is defined as “A disorder of uncertain nosological validity, characterized by the same type of qualitative abnormalities of reciprocal social interaction that typify autism, together with a restricted, stereotyped, repetitive repertoire of interests and activities. It differs from autism primarily in the fact that there is no general delay or retardation in language or in cognitive development. This disorder is often associated with marked clumsiness. There is a strong tendency for the abnormalities to persist into adolescence and adult life. Psychotic episodes occasionally occur in early adult life” [ICD-10, 2016]. Moreover, ICD specified following, detailed diagnostic criteria for AS:

“A. A lack of any clinically significant general delay in spoken or receptive language or cognitive development. Diagnosis requires that single words should have developed by two years of age or earlier and that communicative phrases be used by three years of age or earlier. Self-help skills, adaptive behaviour and curiosity about the environment during the first three years should be at a level consistent with normal intellectual development. However, motor milestones may be somewhat delayed and motor clumsiness is usual (although not a necessary diagnostic feature). Isolated special skills, often related to abnormal preoccupations, are common, but are not required for diagnosis.

**a)** Qualitative abnormalities in reciprocal social interaction.

**b)** An unusually intense circumscribed interest or restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behaviour, interests and activities (criteria as for autism; however, it would be less usual for these to include either motor mannerisms or preoccupations with part- objects or non-functional elements of play materials)” [ICD 1993, pp. 186–187].

## Research methodology

The research described in the article was conducted from June 2017 to January 2018. In order to present the issue in a reliable manner, a number of actions were taken. First of all, the author has got acquainted with literature, studies and specialist reports as well as with legal acts concerning people with disabilities in force in Poland. An important supplement to the literature was getting to know the life stories of people with AS available in films, popular science fiction and fiction literature, whose authors have AS or whose subject matter concerns people with AS. Moreover, it was useful to familiarize with the entries on thematic internet forums and websites of foundations and associations of people with AS (in particular: Autism – Europe, Synapsis Foundation, Polish Society of Asperger Syndrome and the Prodeste Foundation). This allowed in particular to discover the real problems of people with AS in Poland. Very important information was obtained as a result of a direct interview which was conducted in January 2018 with Izabela Broczkowska (an employee of the Synapsis Foundation). Looking for statistical data on the number of people with AS in Poland, the data provided by Central Statistical Office, The Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy, The Office of the Government Plenipotentiary for Disabled People, The State Fund for Rehabilitation of Disabled People and reports of non-governmental organizations were reviewed. Unfortunately, no reliable data was obtained.

## Results

### *AS people in Poland*

An important feature of both autism and AS is the fact that people affected by these diseases are characterized by different levels of dysfunction. Therefore, high, medium and low-functioning individuals are distinguished. Apart from therapeutic issues, this situation causes that people with AS (especially high-functioning): 1) are not aware that they are disabled, sometimes they notice their dissimilarity, but due to the lack of common knowledge about AS, they explain it as a personality trait, temperament, the consequences of life experience or do not explain at all; 2) do not want to identify with people affected by autism; 3) may consciously avoid receiving professional diagnosis and pronouncement; 4) will not admit that they have this disease.

Due to the above, it is very difficult to reliably determine the number of people with AS, both in Poland and in the world. Of course, various governmental and non-profit organizations run their databases. Unfortunately, as mentioned above, some people with

AS do not report to above mentioned organization, because they do not want to reveal themselves, or do not know that they are disable. Another situation occurs among middle and low-functioning people, as they usually undertake professional therapy.

Based on the example of Poland, other barriers can be indicated that prevent full registration of people with AS. These include: therapeutic, legal and social barriers. The therapeutic barrier is associated with the process of taking a treatment by an AS patient. Therefore, we assume that a person with AS decides to take treatment, or does so as a result of the suggestion of someone around him. The first problem that may occur is that the doctor makes a wrong diagnosis. Analysing the statements of people with AS and their families, it was pointed out that AS is confused with depression, ADHD, neurosis, hyperactivity, and even a "youthful period of rebellion". However, if a doctor makes a correct diagnosis, it is not tantamount to putting this person in the "central / national records", because at this stage such a record does not exist. A person with AS has a diagnosis and it is up to her/him whether she or he will apply for a disability pronouncement and thus be formally registered in a centralized national database. Additional barriers to estimating the number of people with AS are associated with the disability pronouncement procedure. As in the case of diagnosis of the disease, a common problem is the low knowledge of AS among the doctors of the predicate, which in consequence may lead to the rejection of the application of the person to declare her/his disability. Another problem is related to the symbols defining the cause of disability. In Poland, this issue is regulated by *The Ordinance of the Minister of Economy, Labour and Social Policy* of July 15, 2003 on pronouncement about disability. Until 2010 the following symbols were inserted on the disability pronouncement due to AS: 01-U (mental retardation) and/or 02-P (mental illness). For this reason, many people with AS, avoiding social stigmatization and ridiculing, avoided applying for a disability pronouncement. Thanks to the initiatives of non-governmental organizations, on 1 January 2010 *The Ordinance of the Minister of Labour and Social Policy* of 23 December 2009 amending the regulation on disability and disability status regulation came into force, in which the 12-C disability symbol was added (overall developmental disorders), used in the diagnosis of AS (but not only). This did not completely solve the problem, but it softened the reception of disability. Another group of barriers concerns the social sphere, in particular the labour market. The problem underlying these barriers can be described as one: "lack of knowledge about AS". The gap concerns not only the disease itself, but its occurrence in general. This causes a number of other problems mentioned above.

As specialists note, the growing number of adolescents and adults with autism will be a challenge for social policy in the coming years [Dorociak et al. 2010]. The problems of persons with AS in Poland may be demonstrated by numerous initiatives undertaken by non-profit organizations, including the Polish Society of the Asperger Syndrome [Ca-

łek, Kwapińska 2014] or the Synapsis Foundation [Report 2017]. This can also be indirectly demonstrated by data of state institutions, such as the report of the Human Rights Defender in 2012, which indicates that 5947 children and youth with autism are taught in Polish schools, including AS [Równe szanse 2012]. Of course, the statistics do not include adults and undiagnosed people.

### *Suggested jobs for AS people*

People with AS like any other group of people differ in many respects. In addition to differences resulting from the specificity of this type of disease, people with AS differ in knowledge, experience, interests, level of intelligence and commitment. Therefore, not all of them should be considered as geniuses, the so-called savants who are exceptions. However, it was noticed that due to the well-developed skill of logical thinking, the interest of people with AS often focuses on mathematical and natural sciences [Preißmann 2012]. In addition, people with AS often have the following skills: credibility, motivation to work, high level of technical skills, accuracy and attention to detail, good concentration during routine activities and procedures, memory for facts and numbers, logical approach to tasks, manual efficiency [Zatrudnianie 2008]. The most widespread set of professions suggested for people of AS was developed in 1999 by Grandin, and include i.e. computer programming, advertising and magazine layout, Web page design or accounting [Grandin 1999]. She also specified professions that they should not perform, i.e. cashier, waitress, receptionist or telephone operator [Grandin 1999]. Some people with AS who have appropriate professional qualifications and the necessary organizational and planning skills can set up their own company. It requires them (just like people without AS) to self-discipline and perseverance, assimilate the principles of social co-existence and cooperation with customers. Self-employment can be fostered by new forms of work, whose development is planned in the near future, such as: an expert for rent for the duration of the project, mobile work using ICT, voucher work (work package purchased from an intermediary organization), portfolio work (self-employed perform work for many customers), crowdworking through the platform (tasks are divided between different employees) [Włoch 2017]. The indicated types of work, especially when performed without contact with other people, arouse reservations of psychologists dealing with AS. They emphasize the threat concerning the social rehabilitation of a person and AS. Namely, a person with AS who will work at home, without having to stay in and contact with other people, will not practice social skills, and thus will deepen their deficit in this area.

## Recommendations on the recruitment and selection of people with AS

In accordance with the provisions of *The Act on the Protection of Personal Data* and anti-discrimination regulations contained, inter alia, in the Labour Code, an applicant is not required to disclose information about his or her disability. It can be both an advantage and a system fault. A high-functioning person with AS without informing about the disease has the opportunity to avoid unnecessary questions and stigmatization or rejection. However, advisers and therapists of people with AS, recommend informing about their disability after all, because it gives the employer who knows the problem, the opportunity to provide adequate support [Zatrudnianie 2008]. Recruiting people with AS it is not necessary to use particularly sophisticated methods or techniques. If organization consciously and intentionally recruit people with AS, it should pay attention to the following matters: 1) whether the recruiter, and especially the interviewer, knows the issue of AS and related problems; 2) are managers of a company sure that learn how to manage such people to avoid conflicts and misunderstandings. In addition, it is worth taking into account the recommendations formulated by psychologists and vocational counsellors cooperating with people with AS (table 1).

**Table 1. Recommendations on the recruitment and selection of people with AS**

Method, technique, tool	Recommendations
Recruitment advertisement	It should not contain jargon or requirements for unnecessary qualifications
Questionnaire	It should encourage people with AS to voluntarily declare their disability
Interview	Avoid telephone calls Ask detailed questions instead of general ones Ask questions about the real experience of the candidate Avoid hypothetical and abstract questions Give the candidate more time to answer Give clear signal that the candidate is talking too long Take into account that the person with AS can take words very literally Keep in mind that a person with AS has difficulty in maintaining eye contact In the case of middle and low-functioning persons, an interview may require the presence of an accompanying person
Competency tests	Very recommended, especially the aptitude test
Psychometric tests	Useless for AS people

Source: based on [Zatrudnianie 2008, pp. 40–49 and Borys-Kierszniewska et al. 2012, pp. 14–17].

### *Special rules referring workplace*

In the available literature on the subject, you can find statements from people with AS emphasizing the need for order and solid rules, rituals. They are looking for an orderly environment with transparent structures [Preißmann 2012]. It is important that in addition to personal discomfort, people with AS may respond to changes very rapidly, which may surprise unprepared colleagues. As emphasized by experts on the subject, with age, the readiness to accept small changes in everyday life increases with people with AS, especially if these experiences are positive [Preißmann 2012]. So, at the employee with AS, the features listed may be poorly noticeable. The solutions supporting good functioning of an AS person in an enterprise include: 1) defining clear rules in the scope of work organization (e.g. beginning and end of working time, rules of taking breaks at work, division of decision-making competences, dress code, place and time of eating meals, holidays, duties, etc.); 2) the existence in the organization of a person who is an "assistant, mentor, trainer" of a person with AS; this person should, of course, have knowledge and experience in the field of AS; the support used should be withdrawn over time; 3) place of tranquillity and relaxation; 4) conducting a specialized process of professional adaptation and employee observation during the trial period; 5) care for ergonomic and occupational hygiene conditions that do not distract attention (acoustics, lighting, etc.); 6) spatial visualization of rooms (clear and legible marking).

### *Recommendations for managers and co-workers*

Social interactions require different skills that a healthy person possesses and uses without having to learn them consciously. It is different in the case of people with AS who, willing to function effectively in the environment must undergo special training in social skills. Coming with other people is for people with AS the most stressful situation they can imagine. As a consequence, many of them retreat from active life and avoid social contacts, concentrating all their attention on their interests to relax [Preißmann 2012]. The basic problem of people with AS is therefore both verbal and non-verbal communication. These people often literally understand idiomatic phrases, proverbs and jokes, speak in a steady tone or too loudly, eye contact with them is restricted. These people seem to be devoid of emotions, which also creates barriers to communication. It is also important to be aware that the symptoms of overloading situations in people with AS can be very diverse and take such forms as headache or dull pressure in the head, dizziness, nausea (with or without vomiting), lack of strength in the members, anxiety, hesitation mood, depression and, moreover, the often repeated feeling that it is impossible to



endure in a given situation, sometimes even the fear of such a state and the impression of an unspecified threat [Preißmann 2012].

**Table 2. Selected principles improving management and cooperation with people with AS**

Category	Suggestion
Communication	Deprived of assumptions, direct, precise, simple, avoiding figuratively, detailed, expressing respect
Forms of communications	Preferred written and graphical Verbal reinforced with a written message
Setting tasks	Explain the purpose of the task, Explain all stages of the task, Specify the expected result or final product Inform about the expected quality Specify the task execution time interval Check if the command has been understood Feedback after completing the task
Changes	Any change in the organization of work should be preceded by an explanation and proper preparation

Source: based on [Zatrudnianie 2008].

## Discussion

The growing trend of the number of people with AS in the world also occurs in Poland. Therefore, it is necessary to activate initiatives in Poland aimed at implementing solutions and good practices from countries that have been supporting people with AS for a long time, such as the United Kingdom, where over 250 000 people with AS live [Zatrudnianie 2008, p. 11]. The guidelines of organizations such as The National Autistic Society or Autism – Europe should also be used. In addition, in cooperation with Polish organizations associated under the Autism – Poland Agreement, knowledge about AS should be propagated, especially among professionals in the field of career counselling and human resource management (employment agencies, employees of HR departments in enterprises, etc.). From the point of view of the organization, adjusting the workplace does not require radical and costly changes. Most modern enterprises are already designing their offices taking care of the ergonomic principles of the work environment, including quiet and team work zones, conferences as well as entertainment and rest areas. Also, the requirements for communicating with an AS person, presented above, do not seem to differ from those commonly required of managers. However, various studies show that internal communication is still one of the least appreciated and developed competences in enterprises, which causes a number of conflicts, misunderstandings and sometimes

organizational pathologies. In the case of people with AS, bad communication makes their work impossible or very difficult.

Ethical aspects of employing people with AS are also necessary to consider, including the protection of information about disease (disclose or not disclose), stigmatization and discrimination. The person interviewed for the purpose of this study, among other things, pointed to the following business problem: some US and Spanish companies in which it is fashionable and beneficial to present the company as a CSR promoter, employ disabled people (including people with AS) and they boast of it as a manifestation of their "openness, tolerance and commitment to CSR". People with disabilities, especially those whose disability is concealed, do not want to be treated as the "object of the business image campaign". On the other hand, enterprises reported that although there are legal and financial solutions creating a favourable atmosphere for employing people with disabilities, they are afraid that if a disabled person does not perform the tasks entrusted to her/him properly, it will be difficult to dismiss this person, not for legal reasons, but just image-related (it's easy to accuse a company of discrimination). This is not an unfounded fear. As the specialists dealing with disabled people also state, they often show a claiming attitude. It should be remembered that the majority of people with disabilities, however, want to work and develop.

## Conclusion

The conducted research allowed to note the growing problem of the necessity of professional activation of people with AS and adaptation of enterprises to cooperate with such persons. The basic organizational solutions that should be implemented in order to effectively cooperate with people with AS are indicated. The sources of knowledge on good practices, that should be used to undertake further research and work related to the issue of AS in Poland, were provided. The research described in the article was of a pilot nature and concerned the preliminary diagnosis of the occurrence of the phenomenon. The necessity of conducting in-depth tests in enterprises and organizations dealing with HR has been demonstrated. Above all, however, attention is drawn to the need for public debate and activities involving the dissemination of knowledge about AS.

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