


If you've employed one person with autism ...: An individual difference approach to the autism advantage at work

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Abstract

In this letter to the editor, we comment on the 'autism advantage' – the idea that superior skills associated with autism (e.g. attention to detail) present a talent in employment – an example of which is a recent discussion by Austin and Pisano. We welcome advocacy that raises awareness around the strengths and capabilities of people with autism, and also the need to reform human resource management processes that disadvantage them. However, we are concerned that, by highlighting certain stereotypes (e.g. the 'talented nerd lacking social graces'), the heterogeneity of autism may be overlooked and support needs downplayed. Furthermore, not appreciating individual differences might result in a misalignment between work-profile and employment, pressure to outperform peers without autism and a failure to appreciate the diverse interests of people with autism. We argue that an individual differences approach will prove more sustainable for improving long-term employment outcomes.

Keywords

autism advantage, autism spectrum disorder, individual differences, talent, workplace performance

Austin and Pisano (2017) describe a composite person with autism 'John' who, despite advanced degrees and mathematical abilities, experiences long-term unemployment. His story illustrates both the high levels of unemployment and underemployment experienced by individuals with autism, who are often disadvantaged by traditional recruitment practices, and potential ways to address this issue. Austin and Pisano (2017) discuss much-needed reform to human resource management (HRM) processes in order to better support employees with autism and to recognise their strengths and talents, which they argue can lead to a competitive advantage for employers. Indeed, the authors provide several case studies reporting superior performance from employees with autism. An 'autism advantage', a term referenced in the literature, popular media, and advocacy and employment groups, is most commonly associated with superior attention to detail and high tolerance for repetitive tasks, strengths centred on the repetitive and restricted behaviours and interests (RRBI) diagnostic criteria.

Experimental research suggests superior performance in autism in visual search and pattern recognition (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009; Happé and Frith, 2006). Mechanisms posited to underlie this superior performance include

biases in information processing (Happé and Frith, 2006) and unique cognitive profiles (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009). Certainly, these skills could be advantageous in the workplace (e.g. reviewing satellite images for troop movement and software testing), with this strength-based approach offering some balance to a condition traditionally viewed through a disability lens. Nonetheless, across studies, the evidence does not always support autism superiority on visual search or pattern recognition (Happé and Frith, 2006). Indeed, given that significant heterogeneity characterises autism, it is likely that performance varies greatly between individuals. Furthermore, empirical support on whether experimental results in controlled settings translate into real-world (i.e. work) environments is currently lacking.

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While an emphasis on strengths is sorely needed, it is crucial to situate this within a dimensional view of autism, and warn of the potential pitfalls of more narrow stereotypical views, even when they are positive. Let us return to composite John. With only two RRBI criteria required for diagnosis, John might not prefer repetitive work tasks, instead preferring to be challenged, to have variety in his work and to use his imagination. Invoking a stereotype that he is predisposed to enjoy repetitive work that others find monotonous could effectively sabotage his job satisfaction while undermining his strengths and potential contribution. Moreover, although greater attention to detail, or the singular focus on an area of interest, could present an advantage in certain work tasks, the underpinning mechanisms that engender this ability may be associated with difficulties in other areas. For example, difficulties with executive function is an alternative mechanism underlying RBIs (South et al., 2007) that can present as inflexibility, or difficulty adjusting to change. An understanding that superior strengths in one domain may require additional support in others is vital for ensuring people like John are successful at work, and their employment is sustainable.

Given the broad and imprecise diagnostic criteria, the individual variation in symptom severity, and the high rates of co-occurring conditions, it is critically important to consider the profile of the individual – rather than taking the common stereotypical view of autism. Appreciation of the individual's strengths *and* support needs, and matching these to employment opportunities, with consideration of what the work environment can offer individuals with autism (Vogus and Taylor, 2018), will enable greater personalised support and engender employment success.

This brings us to what we consider an important, albeit unintended, implication of the rhetoric around advantages and superior talents – do individuals with autism, or any other condition for that matter, really need to prove themselves superior to their peers in order to obtain and maintain employment? We would argue not and emphasise Austin and Pisano's (2017) position that HRM practices need to be reformed to better support *individuals* with autism, irrespective of whether or not they possess exceptional skills. The benefits of improving employment options for people with autism are well documented and include individual, societal and economic benefits. Furthermore, HRM improvements that support autism in the workplace, such as performance focused recruitment, or clear and unambiguous communication, are likely to also benefit employees without autism.

We acknowledge that there are areas in which individuals with autism perform exceptionally and appreciate the importance of identifying their strengths and supporting them appropriately. However, it is also important to remind ourselves that not all individuals with autism have superior skills, nor should they have to, to secure employment. The 'autism advantage' may prove a double-edged sword; while, it is beneficial in raising awareness, it also has the potential to place unreasonable expectations on average John (or Jane for that matter!). Supporting John, and the individuals who make up his composite, by supporting his uniqueness, including both his strengths and support needs, may prove to be the most sustainable approach to employment in the long term.



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