



DON'T PUT US ON THE SCRAPHEAP

Amanda Witt is a qualified library technician currently studying towards her Bachelor's degree at Charles Sturt University. She is also currently volunteering at Community of the Holy Name library, in Cheltenham, Victoria. Yet Amanda is officially unemployed, and has been for five years apart from a short six month contract in a school from 2012–13. Amanda has Asperger's Syndrome and she thinks it's high time employers had a better understanding of what that really means, because it doesn't mean she can't do the job.

I have Asperger's Syndrome, now known as 'high functioning autism'. I decided to write this article to draw attention to the plight of many people on the 'spectrum'. Like me, other people on the spectrum do graduate from school and maybe from a tertiary course, and then go looking for a job.

But until employers and workplaces are willing to take a leap of faith and hire us, we will remain on the employment scrapheap.

I was officially diagnosed just three years ago, and was then eligible to register with a specialist job agency called Alpha Employment. The consultant attended interviews with me, explaining the issues to the interviewing team and clarifying small points that I may miss, such as body language cues which I do not read very well. Unfortunately Alpha lost Government funding at the end of 2012, and the expert consultants were retrenched.

My resume is full of library work, both paid and voluntary, with some non-library voluntary work at places like the Cathedral in Melbourne. I also do a junk mail round for extra money, to keep myself occupied. Yet I have not had an interview since September 2012. Why? Because seeing 'Asperger's' seems to summon fear in some people.

I believe the assumptions potential employers make about Asperger's Syndrome are why I continue to remain

unemployed. I have a brief sentence at the end of my cover letter, stating that I have Asperger's, and may require clarification in interviews. It seems that this is the death knell, with many schools choosing not to interview me, based on incorrect assumptions over what I can and cannot do.

Yet I have almost perfect recall of the Dewey Decimal System. Once I know the library's physical layout, I can shelve the books more quickly than many other staff. I can also direct staff and students to 'the third shelf from the left, on the top, blue cover,' once I know the location of a book or popular series. Yet when I mention this as a strength, it is somehow overlooked, weighed down by all the weaknesses I am perceived to have.

After asking for feedback on an application to work in a school library, I was told by one school that 'the position involves lunchtime supervision and people like you don't like noise.' That is not me. Nor is it many of us with the condition, including the friends I have made through the recently established I Can Network, started at Monash University in 2013.

I feel those who make such a decision judge me on students they may have, students who have meltdowns when the daily schedule is altered, who have to be alone each lunchtime, unable to cope with the playground noise. School staff also may not realise that these students may have been diagnosed but their parents are not always taking them for regular appointments with their psychologist (I see mine every couple of months).

So if you see my application in your pile for a Victorian school or other library, then please reconsider and at least give me an interview. You may be pleasantly surprised, and I will be just as surprised if offered the job.

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