



ADULTS WITH APD AND EMPLOYMENT

© Alyson Mountjoy and Dr Damien Howard

This article was based on our last international Adults with APD Chat, on employment issues affecting people with APD. The chat was held as part of the ongoing APDUK research project into the socio-psychological effects of APD on adults. This is the first of three articles based around the topics discussed.

For the purposes of this article, the terms 'APD' and 'auditory processing problems/difficulties' are interchangeable, because we appreciate that not everyone with auditory processing problems/difficulties has a diagnosis of APD.

Introduction

This first article on Adults with APD and employment focuses on the issues that surround looking for work, types of jobs that suit people with APD (and those that don't). It deals with:

- Career choices - what to avoid if you have APD
- Benefits, problems faced in seeking work and applying for jobs - and support available
- Disclosing your APD
- Interviews and reasonable accommodations
- Other accommodations that might make work less stressful
- What jobs suit and strategies to help you perform best in the job

Finding and maintaining work in the current economic climate can be a very difficult task for anyone. It is often harder for people with APD and other invisible difficulties to negotiate what can be a minefield of finding the kind of work that they like and can do, in a comfortable workplace that provides potential for reasonable accommodations. Stress can result from difficulties in doing the work for a variety of reasons, as well as, being judged by others for not being able to do the work as others do it.

But even before someone gets into the workplace the application and interview process to be selected for a job can be problematic. When and if to declare your APD and other possible conditions is a hard decision. It can be hard to find employers that are willing to give you a fair chance and accommodate you appropriately. We hope that the information generously shared from the research chat participants on what has worked for them (and the pitfalls that they have learned to avoid), will help you with these processes. One of the results of experiencing challenges yourself is the capacity to understand and feel empathy for those who have or will experience similar things. Talking about these kinds of common experiences related to work, or to seeking work, helps to realise we are not alone in our challenges and our feelings about our challenges. So sharing these kinds of experiences and feelings helps to diminish our sense of isolation and inadequacy. Sharing experiences also contributes something that will help others to cope better in the future.

Career choices - what to avoid if you have APD

Those that attended the chat agreed that the sorts of jobs that were hardest were those **“involving verbal communication”** and areas like sales, marketing, reception work, retail and manufacturing environments specifically jobs that were customer-facing. However, people also described strategies, like developing verbal scripts, which could make this kind of work easier. It was agreed that target-focused jobs could be especially hard for many people with APD. Targets, deadlines, multi-tasking and those involving time-specific tasks were usually harder for those people with processing issues. Allowances are often needed for extra processing time for people to be able to succeed in this type of work - and in others.



Career choices - what to avoid if you have APD - *continued*

Situations where people have to use phones are often found to be difficult, although not everyone with APD has problems with phone conversations. It can depend on your knowledge of the phone topic and how familiar you are with the voice and accent of the person on the other end of the phone. Certain types of voice (high/low) and certain accents can cause problems for people with APD, as well people who speak quickly. Some people with APD have difficulty in processing the gaps between words and, if people speak quickly, it all becomes a blur of sound, rather than individual words, so their speech makes no sense. For some, there are fewer challenges if the topic is predictable with familiar vocabulary to process and/or the voice of the person talking is familiar. For example, when talking to a family member about some well-known topic, you have a rich store of knowledge developed over time, as well as familiarity with the way they speak, which helps you to understand what is said. However, talking to a stranger about an unfamiliar topic is a vastly different prospect. The former can feel like a pleasant stroll in a well-maintained park, while the latter can feel like running a marathon through an unexplored jungle.

Teaching is a job that causes difficulties for some people with APD, although the particular skills that auditory processing difficulties can cultivate – especially thinking about how others are thinking – can contribute to people being effective teachers. Children are by nature noisy, especially younger ones. Things like teaching children early on the skill of ‘taking turns’, also waiting to speak till they are called upon and using an ‘inside voice’ for group work etc. can all help with this (and it also teaches them patience and good manners). Teaching is also an occupation where people have permission to control the speaking/auditory processing environment and this can be very attractive to adults with processing problems. However, while teachers have a mandate to control the in-class conversations of children, this is not always easy to do. Open-plan classrooms are renowned for reverberating noise; it will carry from room to room and become a cacophony, a wall of background noise that a teacher (and child) with APD has to try to process through. Muffling the noise can help, via posters on walls, carpeted floors and/or protectors on the feet of tables and chairs etc. to minimise dragging noises. These will all absorb ambient noise and help teachers and pupils alike. Those teaching adults may enjoy explaining things and be very astute at reading audience reactions, but might experience a lot of anxiety around understanding questions that their audience may ask.

The expectations of others at work about how things will be done can be a major obstacle. The standard ways that are efficient for those without auditory processing problems often just do not work well for those who do have them. For some people with auditory processing problems, being able to do work-related tasks in their own way, (not as others do things) is ideal for that person, as it allows them to employ their unique coping strategies. However, this approach is not always acceptable to employers who have expectations about set processes and procedures. The acceptance by employers and colleagues of people doing things in different ways can be easier if you have explained about your auditory processing problems. It can help if others at work understand why their way is not the best way for you, or the company, and they might appreciate what you bring to the job.

Having experienced a lifetime of processing challenges with regular judgement and criticism from others almost invariably cultivates strong tendencies towards self-pathologising and unhelpful self-judgement. One of the most important things to manage in the work environment is maintaining your own confidence and optimism in the face of the challenges you are accepting, supportive people are so important to have around you at work.



One strategy that can overcome the many challenges involved in the social and physical aspects of the work environment is working from home. This enables you to fully control what happens in your work environment yet at the cost of losing the resources available in a workplace - both physical and social. You may not have access to the time-saving equipment in the workplace (although in some jobs where alternative working is the norm they can

be supplied), or have the opportunity to have a chat during breaks. But the benefits can be considerable in reducing the stresses of a challenging work space, such as being able to take a break whenever you need it in order to avoid sensory overload and not having strict deadlines unless they are self-imposed and suit your way of working. Many employers offer flexible working conditions and in some jobs, working from home is the norm. Also self-employment has proved to work for a lot of people - if this is an appropriate or practical option for you.

Benefits, problems faced in seeking work and applying for jobs - and support available

Of course finding a job in the first place can be a minefield in itself. The first port of call in the UK is usually the Job Centre, and whatever the equivalent is in other countries. There are people so affected by APD that they are unable to work and we will discuss this first. If you are unemployed, you need to register for benefits with the Department for Work and Pensions, whether Jobseekers Allowance (UK) if you are able to work, but if you have a diagnosis of APD it is best to declare this at the start. If unable to work because of the severity of your APD (and it must be remembered that most, if not all, people with APD have other co-existing difficulties and disabling conditions), you may qualify for Employment Support Allowance/ ESA and even Carer's Allowance, depending on your type and severity of APD and any other difficulties you have. In order to be allowed ESA, you need to show HOW APD affects your daily life and how it causes an inability to work and in some cases, how you need the care of others to support you in daily activities. For some people this can range from severe communication difficulties to health and safety issues, such as not being able to register the alarm clock ringing to get you up for work and needing someone to physically wake you, or not processing fire alarms when you are asleep from having to block out sound to get to sleep, or not hearing alarms (or phones) at work when you are hyper-focused on work activities and needing to block background noise in order to work. You may have APD-related directional issues which cause you to not hear which direction traffic is coming from - necessitating help from others to cross the road. These are just examples, and everyone is affected differently. The Citizens' Advice Bureau/CAB can help you with your application, or the Welfare Benefits Officer at your local council offices, if they have one.



In other countries, the help of similar agencies may be available. Of course without a diagnosis of APD you will be unlikely to be awarded ESA benefit, and you need to seek diagnosis first if you are to go down that route. The same applies for any other co-existing conditions. You must stress in your application all the ways that APD adversely affects you in order to qualify for ESA, and they must be real day to day issues. Only the worst cases will be awarded ESA. Be aware that this may take many weeks to be assessed, and you will not be able to claim any other benefits while this is being assessed. Also it may be distressing for someone with APD and other difficulties to face the reality of their situation and an inability to cope with certain things, but you must face this in order to claim the benefits that you are fully entitled to. People with APD and other conditions often suffer anxiety and depression as a result of coping with their difficulties, and counselling is always available via the NHS and local mental health charities. Another factor that affects people who are

unemployed, or on low wages - particularly due to disability-related difficulties in finding work (and a possible need to downscale their job expectations in order to find suitable work), is debt and the worry that comes with it. Don't let this sort of worry build up and fester - there are agencies that can help you to manage debt, such as the CAB/council welfare benefits officer etc. Many areas also now have a local food bank that can help families who are struggling. Worry, stress and illness all make the symptoms of APD worse and this can have an ongoing effect, compounding your difficulties in finding work and in interviews and in the workplace - and at home. Don't let it get that far - break the cycle and seek help as soon as you can. There is no shame in being in debt or in needing help. You are not alone in feeling this way.



the symptoms of APD worse and this can have an ongoing effect, compounding your difficulties in finding work and in interviews and in the workplace - and at home. Don't let it get that far - break the cycle and seek help as soon as you can. There is no shame in being in debt or in needing help. You are not alone in feeling this way.

In seeking work, it is always advisable to put together a good CV and there are agencies that can help you with this. It is best to use bullet points and set the CV out clearly, listing as many skills as you can as well as your qualifications and experience. APD can cause people so much difficulty that they never gain qualifications and this is an obvious barrier to work. But you can get around this by focusing on the skills that you DO have, and the compensatory strategies that help you get around your APD are often skills in themselves, which others may never need to develop, and which employers often value (more on this later). You may not be able to drive because of your APD and other issues; this is another barrier to work. But you can always get around this by stating that you are happy to use public transport, although there are many jobs in remote locations (e.g. on industrial estates) or involving shift work, where public transport may not be available, or is not available at the times when you need it (very early

morning or very late at night). Look out for this when applying. If you are in work and seeking a change of employment, you also need to keep your CV up to date. You can also contact your local Careers Office for advice.

As discussed above, look for jobs that you feel will suit your needs and will avoid as many as possible of your APD related difficulties. Be aware of any accommodations that you may need. Registering with as many agencies as possible will help improve your chances of finding suitable jobs, as will local newspapers and employment websites. If you don't have access to a computer at home, your local library and Job Centre provides PCs with internet access and can help you set up an email account. Some local mental health charities (such as Mind) and other voluntary groups also hold free lessons in computer literacy, CV compilation and supported job seeking sessions for the unemployed. There are also several courses available to the long-term unemployed.



There is help available in the UK for people with disabilities, to support them in finding work and in the workplace. Every Job Centre should have an officer responsible for supporting people with disabilities. They can help you add restrictions to your job search agreement which will allow you to list the areas of work that you might find difficulty with e.g. using phones, group work, so that you will not lose your benefits if you don't look for work that includes them. Be aware that despite their best intentions, not all Job Centres are disability friendly, and any form of discrimination experienced there (and in the workplace or other situations) can and should be reported. It is always advisable to take someone with you to all appointments, to act as your advocate. This is your legal right. You can also email the disability adviser a list of your difficulties and reasonable accommodations and any other relevant information, prior to your first appointment with them, so they are prepared and fully aware of your difficulties beforehand and the appointment won't be taken up just discussing APD. (This can be helpful for any type of official meeting that you will need to attend, not just those that relate to benefits or jobs).



Disclosing your APD

Disclosing that you have APD, with or without the addition of any other disability, is a very personal choice and it can be a very difficult one to make; whether when claiming benefits or in employment. Many people don't want to draw attention to themselves in this way. For claiming benefits and seeking work, it is best to be 'upfront'. Deciding when to declare to an employer can be more challenging. There are many reasons for and against declaration. On the negative side, it might be a concern that people might think less of you or treat you differently if they know you have a disability. You may fear being thought of as less able to cope in the workplace and therefore less able to do the job and that you might not get a job because if it, particularly if you declare the disability on your application form, or at the interview. It is true that there can be risks in disclosing your APD to some employers. There is no way to precisely predict how they may respond and some employers are sadly not disability-friendly. However, how accepting they are of others doing things in different ways may give you an idea of how they may respond to you. One chat member said: **"I kind of took the stand that I have APD and I know that I can contribute to this company so if they want me they will have to work with me a bit to make the fit right."** If they don't want people with disabilities, it would not be a good fit anyway.

But if you declare your APD you might find employers that are keen to help and provide the accommodations you need, and informing them as early as possible could be a bonus. One adult said that telling her employer about their APD had helped – **"because they know about it, my environment is much better and I don't worry so much"**. There are employers in the UK who actively seek, employ and support people with disabilities. Some employers subscribe to the '2 Ticks' scheme whereby they commit to employing people with disabilities, and APD is a qualifying disability. If a job advert displays the symbol, you will be guaranteed an interview - if you meet the basic conditions for the job. If you choose to disclose your APD, you should always tick the disability box on any application form or declare your APD by any other application method, on your CV etc. along with any accommodations you might need for the interview or to be able to do the job effectively, and to the best of your abilities – which benefits everyone. It has to be remembered that everyone with APD is affected differently, and may have different severity of APD, different co-existing conditions/disabilities,



coping strategies etc. so the accommodations you ask for should be individually tailored to your unique needs, and only you will know what they are.

In the UK, an employer is obliged to provide 'reasonable accommodations' if you declare your disability when you apply or at your interview. But if you wish to declare it in order to get accommodations, you will need a diagnosis or you will not qualify. If you have a diagnosis of APD or any other condition/disability and do not declare it (and later on find the type of work, the work environment or job demands to be too difficult or unsuitable for your needs), it is usually too late to expect accommodations to be provided and employers have no legal liability to do so if they were not made aware of your APD or other disabilities from the start. It might even end in dismissal if you did not declare any disability which might affect your work, or actively concealed it, and you were employed on the understanding that you were fully able to do the job. So all things considered, disclosing your APD would be more to your advantage than not disclosing it. In other countries, legislation might be different, so please check. (We have added some disability legislation links at the end of the article for you to look at). One chat member described her method. **'I don't disclose until I know how the workplace might need accommodating. Also by then I've proven I'm a good hire. So the disability comes secondary to the mutual recognition that I'm a valuable employee and we both want me to have success.'** Unfortunately in the UK, this is too late to be legally entitled to accommodations, unless the employer chooses to provide them.

Disclosing your APD to work colleagues might need a different approach. Everyone is different and will need to find his/her own strategy and timing, maybe after assessing a 'need to know'. For some people it is essential that everyone is aware, not just the employer/supervisor. For others, disclosure is kept to a minimum, as is their right and their choice. When disclosing your APD to someone, whether it is an employer or colleague, you may need to rely on your intuition about the person; many people with auditory processing problems often have quite strong 'people reading' skills. An approach that does not involve directly disclosing your processing problems is to explain that you are a more visual or hands-on learner and find it easier and are more productive when you do things in visual ways - or however you wish to describe it. Having a strength-focused way of explaining things to employers and work colleagues helps them to accept your preferred way of doing things more easily and to not judge or criticise you so readily. It gives it a positive slant. Explaining it to others in this way can also help remind you to think about your processing challenges from a strength-focused perspective. But it will not take away your need for appropriate accommodations – which you have a legal right to request and to have provided, after disclosure.



Interviews and reasonable accommodations

A lot of employers now tend to use telephone interviews as the first stage of the interview process, which a lot of people with APD find very difficult, especially if they are not expecting a call and are, as one chat attendee put it **'caught off guard'**. You might want to inform the employer of your difficulty at this stage, especially if phone use is not a major part of the job for which you are applying. You could ask for a one to one chat in person instead, or an interview via Skype. If phone use is intrinsic to the role, and you have major problems in that area, perhaps that type of job is not for you and you should avoid applying for those sorts of positions. One participant stressed the importance of **"enthusiasm, and skills at verbal expression - sounding intelligent. It almost mattered more in some cases than being able to answer the question perfectly."** Sometimes you can just use what you know.

This emphasises the need for interview techniques to compliment your qualifications and experience. It can help to research the organisation and the job as much as possible before you have any interview, (either by phone or in person). This sort of research usually impresses employers with your interest and motivation. For people with auditory processing problems, having the additional background information can help with understanding questions that you will be asked. It can help to have prior knowledge of job-related vocabulary and to familiarise yourself with technical terms/jargon/buzz words, if applicable, as familiarity of such vocabulary can aid processing – as with the benefit of pre-teaching at school/college. If it is feasible, visiting a workplace before you are interviewed can really help to get valuable contextual information that will help you to answer questions when interviewed. This may not be possible, but anything that helps you get more background information can help you



to know how to respond in interview. If phones are not a problem, you can ring the named contact on the job description/advert for more information about the job, or email them if that is preferable. If they know and remember your name, it might give you an edge, as being someone who is eager to go the extra mile in preparation.

Some useful interview tips are listed below.

1. Before the interview, if you have already declared your APD, if there is a section asking what accommodations you might need at interview, you can ask that the questions be given to you on arrival and time allowed for you to write your responses. You can then read from them during the interview or refer to them. Some companies now do this as standard for everyone, with or without disabilities. This can help with word retrieval difficulties - for which you can also request extra time in order to give your responses.
2. Confident responses come from preparedness for an interview; so having researched beforehand about the company and the role applied for always helps.
3. Anticipating what type of questions you might be asked, (based on the job description and person specification for that job) is another good strategy. Be prepared!
4. By anticipating what questions they might ask you can prepare replies that you think they might expect and rehearse them, which can help avoid word retrieval problems.
5. Also preparing some questions to ask your interviewers will show interest in the company e.g. you could ask about uniform, overtime, holidays, pension scheme etc.
6. Try to arrive early - to minimise stress about being late and also to give you time to mentally prepare yourself. Take some deep breaths and try to relax while you are waiting to be interviewed.
7. Listen very carefully to the questions, ask them to repeat or rephrase anything you don't understand, or ask for clarity around the context of the question and remember to refer to any prepared replies.
8. If you cannot answer a question, don't be tempted to make it up!
9. In your replies, only discuss topics that are relevant to the job and explain your experience and qualifications for the job.
10. Don't be over-friendly or over-confident, but don't be afraid of the interviewers either, they had to start somewhere too.
11. Always be polite, even if the interviewer isn't.
12. Don't be put off if there is more than one interviewer; they usually only speak one at a time, taking turns at asking questions.
13. If you are over-qualified for the job, you may want to play that down if you sense the interviewer may be threatened by your experience. But generally focus on how the strengths you bring can help the work you can do. Most employers like a 'bargain', of employing someone who will have more capacity in the job than they expected
14. If you are under-qualified, explain that you are willing to undertake any training necessary. In this situation also emphasise your motivation and enthusiasm to do a good job. Most employers have experienced the problems with a capable but unmotivated employee. They often place a priority on a good attitude and willingness to learn rather than a perfect background for the job. It is especially important when underqualified to be the kind of person others will want to work with.
15. If you are a quick learner, stress that you have that skill and give examples.
16. Certain skills and qualities are often required for certain kinds of jobs - like good prioritisation skills, time management, self-motivation, company loyalty, being hard working etc.
17. The ability to work alone would benefit someone with APD and is often a pre-requisite of some jobs, just like flexible working hours and the ability to work nights (when it is quieter).
18. If you don't drive, make sure when applying that adequate public transport is available for the hours that you need to work, both to and from work, especially in isolated locations, and say that you are prepared to use it to get to work in a timely fashion.
19. If you have relevant experience, tell them about it; expand upon it in detail and show that you are capable. The experience of having APD can foster excessive humility and self-doubt especially when facing the unknown. To overcome doubts about how you may be able to do a job focus on past things you have done that were similar. Tell about how you solved problems, what you enjoyed about the job.



Focusing on past successes will help build your confidence in yourself and the employer's confidence in you.

20. Beware of over thinking! It is a common trait in those with APD which can be useful when you have enough information. But when you have insufficient information, as is usually the case in a job interview, your imaginings run the risk of being irrelevant fantasies that will not impress employers. It is generally safer when you have inadequate information to focus on 'what you have done' than 'what may happen'.

21. Be prepared to start work at short notice – plan any contingency arrangements (childcare, transport etc.) prior to interview in case they ask you to start immediately. This will lessen stress.

22. Always provide reliable referees and inform them when you apply for a job that they may be contacted to give you a reference, with details of the job applied for so that they can tailor the reference to show your aptitude for that role. Often they will accept personal referees if you don't have professional ones. If you don't have referees who know you doing that kind of job, pick referees who are enthusiastic about you and know your strengths- that is what employers are often interested in hearing about from referees. Referees are checked when someone is on the short list. At that stage employers want confirmation and reassurance that their positive impression of you is accurate.

23. Don't give up – if you are unsuccessful, keep trying; something better will come along, maybe better paid or better suited to your skills and accommodation needs. If the job is not a good match for you it can be the best outcome for you not to get it.

If you are disclosing your APD on the application form or at the interview (which is highly recommended if you wish to be allowed reasonable accommodations), have a list ready which details the accommodations that you might need to do the job. Stress that you are as capable as anyone else of doing the job, with the appropriate help and in order to get the best out of you as an employee, they will benefit from supporting you.

Possible accommodations that chat members found helpful are things like:

- **“extra processing time”**
- **that other people “do not talk too fast”**
- **“ask for a quiet working area”**
- **“do face to face meetings or over Skype”**
- **“asking for instructions to be written down, asking for extra time on certification exams (because learning required auditory processing)”**
- **“use written form of communication”**
- **“a headset for the phone”**
- **“asking for an organisational chart if one isn't already available”**
- **“not talk to others using the phone”**
- **“assistive device - a Smartpen called the Live scribe”**
- **“written confirmation of meetings and conversations”**
- **“asking for feedback and receiving feedback that I'm doing a good job”.**



Other accommodations might include prior written notice of meetings and written agendas prior to the meeting in order to prepare responses, also the chance to respond in writing after a meeting if you have word retrieval issues or cannot process questions/ new information in time to answer/comment on the day. Also if your work duties should change, be sure that they fit in with your agreed contract and pay grade and ask to negotiate additional accommodations, if necessary.

However, as well as talking about accommodations don't forget to also tell them about compensatory strengths. These are things that you may do better than others, although having using ways that work for you. Some common traits developed by those with APD are below. These can be included in your application form in the section where they ask for details about your ability to do the job, what makes you the best candidate.

- Persistence – keeping at it when others give up.
- Flexibility – being better than others at finding creative and workable ways of doing things
- Creating routines and structures that promote things being done efficiently. This can be appreciated by co-workers.

- Fostering a harmonious workplace. Needing a comfortable non-judgemental work environment themselves people with APD are often good at fostering this kind of place for others.
- A 'get on with the job attitude'. Social chit chat not being comfortable often means that people with APD are not comfortable with, what from an employer's perspective, is time wasting socialising at work.
- Working at developing a really detailed understanding how things operate and get done.
- Being hard-working, loyal - which are not coping strategies, but are qualities nonetheless valued in an employee
- Having empathy - very valuable in the caring professions. This also helps in being supportive of colleagues under stress. Knowing what it feels like and what is needed when feeling stressed often helps those with APD be good at recognising when others are stressed and knowing what can help them.
- Attention to detail - the need to be attentive with APD to get it right
- Being an 'outside the box' thinker - thinking creatively brings a lot to any job
- Having the skills to be a trouble-shooter etc. – seeing through problems as a way to cope and get around them is a natural thing for some people with APD.
- Good prioritisation skills - (essential when so much of your time is taken up with processing). You need to know which is the most important task and get it done first – also this can help if get tired, as can happen with APD.

Not anyone with APD will have developed all of these traits – describe what is particular to you. Be realistic in what strengths you have and tell employers about them as well as the tailored accommodations that you need. If you have other co-morbid issues like sound sensitivity or other sensory sensitivities, or other co-existing conditions/difficulties, which are problematic alone and which might also make the APD harder to handle, you should request accommodations for those too.

"Let's stop "tolerating" or "accepting" difference, as if we're so much better for not being different in the first place. Instead, let's celebrate difference, because in this world it takes a lot of guts to be different."

~ **Kate Bornstein**

Other accommodations that might make work less stressful

In certain jobs, having prepared verbal dialogue can help people to know what to say without feeling put on the spot and being stressed by that. Having prepared scripts about regularly occurring situations can help people cope more effectively with otherwise distressing verbal interaction. But this only helps with knowing what people are going to say - processing that information is still hard, especially if people did not respond in an expected way and did not provide the expected response. One person commented that they were **"really good at retail because I scripted my dialogue, but it was always taxing to listen to answers."** Over time, if questions asked are predictable, a range of 'response scripts' can be developed that makes it easier to answer recurring questions.

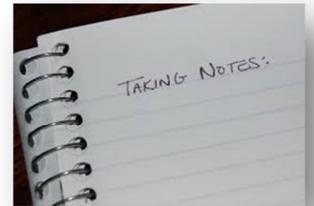
So understanding others became easier if people can accurately anticipate what others are likely to say. They know what to expect. While scripts helped structure what the person with APD would say, the knowledge developed over time of what others were likely to say also made processing easier and made it is easier to participate in verbal interactions. As one person put it, **"jobs with rehearsed responses are very good and (those) where you know what to expect."**

Most people with APD have problems in following conversations and have auditory memory difficulties which cause problems in remembering spoken information. Auditory sequencing issues means that they cannot remember information said to them in the right order. Everyone present in the chat said that they preferred instructions etc. to be written down for them. It is also not unreasonable to ask anyone giving you instructions to speak clearly and not rush, because failure to do so is often why written instructions are needed. Of course nothing much can be done about strong accents, which often cause major problems for people with APD. Unfamiliar voices can cause problems in a new job too, until you have time to get used to them. Some people also have problems with certain pitches of voice, e.g. some people cannot easily process male voices and for others female voices are

difficult to understand. (The same difficulties will affect children in a new class or a new school). Therefore the greater use of communication through non-verbal means will help reduce auditory processing demands for people in many work situations, i.e. when **“everything is done by email or online chat”** – also socially.

Poor auditory processing can also cause other short term memory related issues such as difficulty with multi-tasking. Problems with organisational skills are not caused directly by APD - APD just causes problems with processing what we hear. BUT that said, APD can have an impact on other areas. If you are trying to process a conversation while at the same time trying to do something else, such as make notes, something has to give. This is one reason why some kinds of training can be a challenge for those with auditory processing problems.

Delayed processing means that spoken information is not processed quickly enough to be useful. Remember that the short term memory can only hold information for an estimated maximum of 2 minutes before you ‘ditch it’ or use it. If you choose to use it, it passes into the working memory, but what gets there may be incomplete, gibberish, or in the wrong order. If your processing ability takes longer than that time, a lot of the information - or all of it - will be lost completely. Writing it down is a coping strategy that some people use, but it is not effective for everyone as this also takes up memory; in holding what you need to write in your head while focusing on what else is being said means that one or other might not be possible. Watching the speaker to be able to better understand what is said (e.g. by lip-reading or reading body language), makes it hard to also be able to make good notes at the same time. This is why online training courses may be preferable, because most lecturers and trainers deliver information in an auditory-sequential way. But online training may not suit those who like to question others about what they understood about what was said, as a way of coping with processing problems. Your preferred learning style should therefore be taken into account when pursuing training options. It is also a consideration in the type of accommodations that suit you best. These memory-related issues can make multi-tasking hard for people with processing difficulties. Add to that any visual processing deficits, attentional problems or other compounding challenges and it all becomes harder. Writing or typing at the same time becomes more automatic with practise, like any skill, so you can then focus on the processing. But for some people with APD, this never becomes a manageable task. Recording a conversation or set of directions can help, if you then replay it later at your own speed, but some people do not wish to be recorded and will not give their permission.



People with auditory processing problems often develop compensatory strengths that they can use. In completing work-based tasks they may have the same outcome, but achieve it in a quite different way to how others achieve it, as mentioned earlier. One person said. **“I have strong visual processing skills so trying to keep up with an assembly line doing visual inspection was OK.”** It is useful to know your strengths and areas of weakness as these help you in development of your individual coping mechanisms. In some people, good long-term memory can compensate for poor short term memory and for some people it takes much longer to learn a new process, but as



one chat member said, **“when I have learnt it, I probably know it better than anyone else.”** Because people with auditory processing problems often learn things differently they often understand things at a deeper level and from different perspectives than their colleagues. This is often not apparent unless there is a problem that they can help solve because of this deeper understanding. A woman with auditory processing problems who worked in IT described how her colleagues were sometimes amazed at the depth of her knowledge of how to do certain things. But they were also often frustrated with the slowness that she completed usual tasks. They did not understand that the two were related - doing things in a different way to them often took longer, but in doing so she had developed understandings of processes that they did not have. It looked like she produced the same outcomes as them, maybe more slowly, but did so often in quite different ways to them. It was like they

all went on a journey to get from A to B. They took the most direct path from A to B along the main road while she took the side roads in a meandering path because the main road was blocked for her. But sometimes her greater knowledge of those side roads was very useful.

Exchanging tasks with other employees can be another good way of supportive working. If you are unable to take phone calls and another employee has difficulty with another job task, e.g. is no good at spreadsheets which you are good at, offer to swap with them – so that they take all the calls and you do all their spreadsheets. But be careful the other person does not take advantage of the situation- it should be a balanced deal! Employers often support workers to use their skillset to the best advantage of the company – using the best person for each task, so they should be agreeable to this arrangement. So long as all the work is done, and it is commensurate with your pay grade, it can be a bonus for everyone.

Time and patience are all it will cost a prospective employer to help people with challenges to become valuable staff members, that is, if the employer is willing to wait. The benefits for them are that they will have a staff member with greater persistence in the face of adversity and depth of knowledge of their work processes. Furthermore, in this age of rapid staff turnover they are likely to get someone who is a 'stayer'. Because having familiar people and routines is most comfortable for those with auditory processing problems, they often stay in the one job and are less tempted to jump quickly from job to job looking for better opportunities. This means employers may face more initial training costs, in greater time to master the job, with someone with auditory processing problems. However, if that person stays longer in the job they will save on training costs in the long term in not having to regularly train new people.

Participants in the chat spoke about the importance of the social work environment for them. The environment could be just as important/more important than the career itself – one person talked that they needed to work in an inclusive environment. It was important to those that declared their APD that everyone should understand their APD issues. The physical environment was also important, especially in how it structured the quality of auditory processing opportunities. Background noise was often a critical issue. For example one person spoke about how although they were in an open plan office with high levels of background noise they could go somewhere quiet to take calls. **“My office is an open plan, but when I need to make a phone call I move to a meeting room and I often wear noise cancelling headphones to help me focus.”** This can be a vital accommodation/coping strategy for many people with APD, where alternative space is available.



What jobs suit and strategies to help you perform best in the job

It was agreed by all the chat participants that the learning process (of what jobs suit them) can be quite painful and confidence-destroying. It was decided that it is generally down to trial and error so you 'won't know until you try', at least at first, until you come to recognise the issues that crop up time after time. Even well-rehearsed coping strategies can fail on occasion, but they can be adapted, often by use of your preferred learning style. One chat member said **“having scripts, if it's sales... I can never remember them as per what is expected – with my word recall problems; writing things down - like if on the phone, writing it all down helps me process it.”** Some accommodations to get around the problems are lists, emails, written instructions – it all depends how accommodating the employer chooses to be. One participant stated that they had asked for all verbal instructions to be written down and another asked for customers to write down their name or ask for their license to type in their details rather than receiving it verbally. Self-advocacy is therefore vital in these sorts of situation. Only you know what accommodations you need. Of course some employees are less than accommodating. One person told us that **“the first job I took going back to work lasted only 9 days because of my APD and when my boss mentioned the problems, I told them about my APD and I was let go a few days later.”** Perhaps declaring the APD in the beginning might have avoided the situation – the employer might have put accommodations in place if he had known about it from the start, or he might have sacked her for not disclosing her APD from the start, or she may still not have been appointed - but at least she would have avoided the distress of losing her job. Having enough time to get to know the job and the people in it is often important. One participant said **“It has been determined that I need to have a trial period, for both me and the employer to assess if the job is suitable.”** This approach of 'seeing if the job is a right fit' is an important one. It is useful to see 'the fit' as not being right - not that you have failed. To stay somewhere where there is a bad fit will only create stress-filled work days and mutual dissatisfaction. But it means seeing the



situation of moving on from something that is not a good fit as something positive. It is much harder of course if someone is 'let go' by an employer. It is hard to not feel that one has failed. But it doesn't mean you should give up. Having time to see if a job suits you and working at ways of getting it to fit would be ideal. The employee could consider whether it was practicable for them to stay in that job with the correct accommodations, and employers could then look into providing reasonable accommodations to allow the employee to stay. If the employee felt it would not work, in a 'no blame' scenario, it should not affect the employee gaining benefits immediately, if applicable, should the job not be suitable for them. Nothing in life is a failure if you learn from it.

Thomas Edison said some things to keep in mind to encourage resilience:

"I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work."

"When you have exhausted all possibilities, remember this - you haven't."

"Our greatest weakness lies in giving up. The most certain way to succeed is always to try just one more time."



Summary

In summary, what we found after reflecting on the comments made by chat members, was that finding and maintaining a job depends on the individual's unique range of capacities and difficulties, which create a unique employment profile. There are many benefits to discussing the many similarities that people with auditory processing problems face in employment. It helps to fast-track your own learning by being able to learn from others' experiences. It also helps people not to feel so alone in the challenges experienced, and it helps to reduce the tendency towards self-criticism that can foster anxiety and depression. People with auditory processing problems can feel very alone and often blame themselves when things don't go well at work or in getting work. Moreover others who don't understand the challenges of auditory processing problems at work will also often blame them. Not understanding what is going on they may see them as unmotivated, lazy or stupid, which is unfair and untrue. For some people with APD in the workplace, these perceptions may result from frustration and ill-informed misperceptions as to why a person acts in the way they do, or more often does not act in the way expected. It may be born of ignorance because the employee has not explained that they have APD and what that means. However as is the case with children with auditory processing problems in schools, bullies can be a common problem encountered in the workplace. It is common for many people with auditory processing challenges to have an acute sense of fairness and justice and be affronted by processes and actions that are unfair towards others. Having themselves experienced (and often been distressed by) unfair and unreasonable judgements and treatment, they are often strong advocates who seek to protect others from experiencing the same. However, it is usually much



harder to self-advocate against overt bullying experiences in the workplace than it is with direct instances of bullying. New experiences of bullying, and even a negative attitude or casual comment, can trigger memories and emotional reactions related to instances of past bullying. In some instances this can be so severe that people fit the diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress. However, the emotional challenges experienced by people with processing problems, which are described in this article, are not well understood by mental health professionals. If you experience auditory processing problems and are seeing a counsellor or mental health practitioner, it may be helpful to provide them with this article and other information on APD. The combination of habitual self-blame and persistent experience of blame by others can be a devastating combination that impacts on how people view themselves and feel about themselves. Accepting those negative perceptions and judgements can create a self-fulfilling prophecy where people act in the way that others perceive them as being. There is a concept called 'internalised oppression' where a criticised group come to accept the ill-informed critical view of themselves that others have of them. The concept is usually applied when people are part of a group with some obvious difference (like race) who are discriminated against. While the differences of those with auditory processing problems are invisible, they often encounter very similar reactions from others because of their challenges. Since there is not any obvious, overt difference that others are reacting to, it is more likely that people will personalise criticisms and not realise they are part of a group that is misunderstood and often discriminated against. People with auditory processing problems can come to believe the view of themselves that those ill-informed others promote. They can come to see and accept the same distorted image of themselves that they see in the eyes of others. The very skill in

being adept at reading the attitudes and thinking of others, developed as a compensatory strategy to cope with auditory processing problems, can result in them being bathed in the toxic environment of others negative judgements. That capacity to 'read others' non-verbal statements, as opposed to only experiencing whatever is said verbally, is part of the reason that being around positive affirming people in the workplace, and in life generally, is so important for those with auditory processing problems. For those with this ability to read body language/non-verbal ability, a toxic environment is much more damaging than for those who are less non-verbally sensitive. People are usually more controlled in what they say in the workplace, but have less conscious control of how they say it and other non-verbal responses which often communicate what they really think to those adept at reading this. Their misconceptions - and the way they behave in reaction to them - need to be seen by those with APD as what they are, ill-informed distortions. They should no more be accepted than should the images of ourselves seen the distorting mirrors at the circus. Ideally, others need to be educated to have greater awareness of APD as an invisible disability. Realisation that what they are doing is actually discrimination towards someone that has a disability might come as a shock to many people.



The impact of the discrimination itself can be powerful. One person at the chat said, **'I went through 4 years of disability discrimination in the workplace, and the post-traumatic stress is still there'**. Another person stated, **'rather than chalking it up to 'personality differences' and hating other people, I'm more likely to give people the benefit of the doubt and try to work through it.'** But victims of such behaviour should never have to tolerate it.

Add to these commonly experienced processes the unique coping strategies used to get around challenges, the different personalities as well as individual likes and dislikes, types of job, working environments etc. and the variety of personality traits to deal with is immense. No river is ever stepped into twice as the water flowing by is always different. In the workplace, the potential variety can be huge, but having predictable, manageable processes fostered by having autonomy in how the job is done, supportive people to work with and a job that matches your interests, skills and training, can all help greatly to make things work.

Early diagnosis would be a helpful factor in helping people choose appropriate jobs and preventing some of the difficulties experienced by those that attended the chat, because they will already be aware of their communication challenges when they come to seeking work. But not everyone is diagnosed as a child; many people with APD cope superficially, or think their difficulties are caused by something else, not realising they are affected by APD until their own child is diagnosed. It is never too late to seek diagnosis.

It is also worth noting that prior training and career choices will dictate the areas of work chosen, probably because people have chosen training that is directly linked to the type of area that they would like to work in, which, in many cases of late diagnosed adults, may be well before they realise that their problems exist and the extent to which they might affect them in the workplace – and might not be the best choice for them. There is nothing wrong with revisiting your work ideals and switching career paths to something that might be a 'better fit' with APD, a job which helps you to work around your APD better. Retraining is an option because with a diagnosis of APD you are entitled to reasonable accommodations in adult education, just as you are at work, and many adults with APD benefit from switching jobs and pursuing new career paths. It might mean a drop in money or status in some cases, but it may be well worth it for a decrease in stress. Many adults have found greater happiness and wellbeing in this way.



Understanding how many of the things being experienced at work is related to auditory processing problems can really help to cope and manage better. It can be the difference between having a map to help guide a journey or having to find your way without a map with many of the unfriendly locals you encounter constantly shouting 'wrong way - go back you idiot!' Their age of diagnosis might vary, but one thing that everyone participating in the chat had in common, was that they need help and support, appropriate accommodations and full consideration of their APD and other disabilities, in order to be able to function at their best in the workplace.

As one attendee said, **'That is why I need potential employers and fellow employees to know about my APD.'** Only full disclosure and acceptance can allow some people to cope in a working environment, where they know what to expect every day, that appropriate support is in place allowing them to just get on with their job without worry, knowing that everyone understands. People with a disability should not have to hide who they are. We spend more time at work than we do at home and everyone has the right to feel and be happy at work.

Also it is to the employer's advantage, as well as that of any employee, to make sure that people with APD get all the help they need. People with APD may have many qualities that employers look for, as listed earlier. These qualities often exist as developed compensations to help people with APD to overcome their difficulties, and are valued by many employers. But it is fair to say that unless people with APD disclose their APD and/or other disabilities, they will not get the help they need and cannot expect to, because even the best intentioned employer cannot help if they are unaware of the problems that their employees face every day. On the other hand, there are employers who will use a disability as a reason to get rid of an employee, whether they declare it or not, and there are also those who will not provide accommodations even when it is disclosed, preferring to employ someone who needs no such consideration. This is a global problem that needs addressing, as not all countries have accessible, well-advertised processes that protect people with disabilities in the workplace. Whatever the established processes, it often comes down to the employer having the empathy and humanity to be able to relate to the person who faces challenges at work. But it can be especially hard when those challenges are invisible, as in the case of processing problems. Unfortunately, hard economic times and increasingly centralised, digital and impersonal employment processes often do not help. The capacity to achieve a sense of our essential shared humanity in facing our different challenges becomes harder to experience without sufficient face to face contact and shared time together. However, when that can and does occur, all are enriched by it.

An inclusive, caring approach will help everyone in the workplace. A caring employer is a good employer, and they are the ones who will have the happiest work environment (and they will also find that it is also the most productive). Stress is responsible for a lot of ill-health and lost working days to an employer, as well as the negative impact it has on all employees. APD is made worse at times of stress, whether consciously felt or in those that are subconsciously affected. Reducing stress helps everyone, and we will discuss this topic in a later article in this series.



Conclusion

People have different attitudes about whether they wish to identify with having an auditory processing disorder. Some people prefer to see themselves as not 'disordered' but as different. They feel that they have many compensatory skills that have contributed to them having particular strengths, strengths which may not be as evident among people who are not 'disordered'. Indeed they may even feel themselves 'blessed' by aspects of their difference. In one chat, it was discussed how people with auditory processing problems often habitually considered a greater number of perspectives than most other people. One person described it seeming like others lived in a more starkly 'black and white world', while they lived in one where they perceived more colour and shade than most others. They were asked if they could choose to have normal auditory processing skills at the cost of living in a simpler more black and white world, would they choose that. Everyone participating in the chat said 'no', they would choose to remain in their more complex and nuanced reality rather have greater processing ease.

However, as the demands of the work situation can be very great for people who have problems with auditory processing, the benefits that can be accessed through disability legislation require people to go through the process of having their auditory processing 'disorder' identified and declared. However, we do not have to believe the labels we have placed on us. Any label can only partially describe the full diversity of who we are. Having a label of being 'disordered' can be useful in accessing benefits and accommodations, but it can be uncomfortable if people have often felt marginalised and rejected in social groups because of communication challenges. A disability is not the sum total of who a person is – people with APD are so much more than what a label may describe. The disability label merely catalogues the socially agreed-upon similar challenges which people with a common condition may have. Unfortunately, it does not entail their shared compensatory strengths developed in the face of

those experienced challenges and it can never describe the unique blend of skills and coping strategies developed by each individual.

It may be helpful to see oneself inhabiting a 'quantum' reality - where multiple universes can co-exist and be constantly being created. It certainly enables greater flexibility to switch between being 'disordered' or 'blessed' depending on the specific needs of one's current context. As noted above, those with auditory processing problems are often very adept at dealing with multiple perspectives - it is a common 'blessing' among those identified as having an auditory processing 'disorder'. Existing alongside the disorder is the myriad of compensatory gifts, the adaptability and resourcefulness which, if used to your advantage, can outweigh the difficulties. Find your gifts and use them. In conclusion, one chat attendee summarised perfectly what was needed. **'I think more awareness about APD specifically or... really broad and wide-range campaigning for disability accommodations for all invisible disabilities'**. This is something we can all help with...

About the authors involved in the Adults with APD Research Project

Alyson Mountjoy is Co-founder and former Chair of APDUK and former APDUK Newsletter Editor. She home educated her son who has APD, Hyperacusis, VPD, writing difficulties and certain other sensory issues, having had experience in working with children with severe Specific Learning Difficulties, and as a writer of educational resources for children with literacy skills deficits. She also runs 3 APD Facebook support groups (please see below). She can be contacted at apduknews@aol.com

Dr Damien Howard is an Australian psychologist who specialises in the psycho-social outcomes of listening problems (hearing loss, listening and auditory processing problems). He is available for internet based consultations and can be contacted here: damien@phoenixconsulting.com.au

Disability Discrimination Legislation links

UK - <http://www.nidirect.gov.uk/the-disability-discrimination-act-dda>
<http://tinyurl.com/onoukng>

US - <http://www.ada.gov/pubs/ada.htm>

Australia - <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/our-work/disability-rights/guides/brief-guide-disability-discrimination-act>

New Zealand - <http://www.legislation.govt.nz/act/public/2000/0091/latest/DLM80051.html>

Canada - <http://www.pch.gc.ca/pgm/pdp-hrp/canada/abl-eng.cfm>

APD SUPPORT

For UK support please visit the Facebook group - 'APD Support UK'

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/1505407259721683/>

Also an international 'Adults with APD' Facebook group

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/APDadults/>

And a Facebook group for 'UK Teens / Young Adults with Auditory Processing Disorder'

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/309381575878508/>