

An APD Guide for Employers:



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In the UK at present, it is estimated that around 20% of the adult population suffers from a condition called Auditory Processing Disorder (APD). This means that one in five employees has this to some degree and the same ratio of employers (and customers/clients). According to national figures from March 2022, that is over 8 million adults with APD. That is a shockingly large amount of the population, especially when you consider how few people have heard of it. By comparison, Autism only affects 1.1% of children and everyone has heard of that. Incidentally, all those with Autism are now believed to have APD in some measure (although not everyone with APD will have Autism).

The workplace is where adults spend most of their time, and APD can lead to a host of issues in seeking and maintaining work. This document will describe APD and its effects (especially in the workplace) and explain how employers can help employees with APD to maintain employment by way of small reasonable adjustments.

About APD

APD is one of the invisible disabilities and, as such, it cannot be easily identified or noticed. You would not say to look at someone that they had APD; especially as it does not affect intelligence.

Here are some examples of APD difficulties and how they might affect your employees and colleagues, maybe even yourself if you have such difficulties and you don't know why.

- APD affects the way that the brain processes what is heard. It is a medical condition and the World Health Organisation/WHO also considers it to be a hearing disorder of neurological origin (because APD is due to damage to the brain). People can be born with it or acquire it at any time in life from a variety of causes. Anyone might have APD and may not know it until the effects become

harder to ignore: automatically-developed coping strategies fail such as vision (the primary coping mechanism) as we get older, also hearing itself, making it harder to cope with difficulties that you may previously have managed (or masked)

- APD affects everyone uniquely with a combination of different difficulties, another reason why it can be hard to identify.
- APD is not itself a learning disability, but it can greatly affect a person's ability to learn at any age. Workplace training can also be affected.
- APD does not cause hearing loss, but we all need the brain to process what we hear so we can make sense of it: otherwise, it is just noise and speech can be jumbled or meaningless. The effects of APD can be random and intermittent throughout the day, sometimes more noticeable than at other times, and worse when ill, tired or stressed.
- APD exists in those with perfect hearing, but it can also affect people with hearing loss, which has an even greater impact. Difficulty understanding speech when it is noisy is common. Assistive listening devices (ALDs) can help with this by improving sound quality and directing it to the sufferer's ears by way of a microphone and headphones/earbuds to minimize background noise. APD can also cause problems with understanding what is heard and remembering it, but even hearing speech clearly with amplification doesn't necessarily mean they will always understand or remember it all. But this is only one issue that they need help with, unlike those with hearing loss.
- APD might prevent a person from being able to determine who is speaking in a group or locating where the speaker is, due to spatial processing issues.
- APD can also cause difficulty following and remembering verbal instructions, or getting them in the wrong order.
- APD can have a knock-on effect in other areas such as word recall when speaking or forming a verbal or written response, delayed processing (speech may not make sense until later when the sufferer replays the conversation in their mind, maybe minutes or hours later, or even the next day). There may be problems understanding fast-talkers and people with a strong accent, with using

the phone or with video conferencing due to degraded sound signals, unfamiliar voice patterns or background noise issues. There can be difficulty with taking accurate notes, plus added executive function issues with planning and organisational tasks, getting used to subject-specific vocabulary etc.

- APD can lead to exhaustion, sensory overload, headaches, stress etc. in any situation, at any age.
- APD is estimated to be the cause in 70% of cases of dyslexia so many employees with APD may also be dyslexic too and will need support for that.

[If you are an adult who suspects that they have APD, read more about APD, learn the signs, and seek a diagnosis as soon as you can. A link to further information on APD, diagnosis and testing centres, other documents and support is provided at the end].

Other issues

A lot of adults with early-onset APD leave school with few qualifications, sometimes none, certainly less than they should have, even though they have the intellect and ability to do better. They usually have other conditions and difficulties too, which may or may not have been supported. They might then go from one poorly-paid job to job to another due to a lack of qualifications and support. It can also strike at any time, affecting a person's entire life, even decimating a successful career.

Some adults with APD may try adult education and with the right support, they may get a degree and hope to pursue a chosen career. Some of those may not get any further qualifications if the educational institution they attend also fails to support them. But even if they do succeed and manage to get a job in their chosen career, without support they might again fail to progress in that job, forced to leave because the situation is untenable. They may be let go if they make mistakes, or their employer won't make adjustments for them (even though that is unlawful). They find themselves once again going from job to job until someone gives them the support they need. They want to work; they can succeed, but there is just one thing missing: support. We need to break that cycle of wasted opportunities for adults with APD and employers are vital to that process.

Because APD affects all aspects of receptive and expressive communication, every aspect of their lives can be affected. APD can lead to sufferers finding it hard to be believed when they say they are struggling due to its random nature. They may appear to hear and understand at times because they do, but it doesn't last, like a faulty lightbulb flickering on and off. They can be accused of lying due to this intermittent effect which is out of their control. They can appear unreliable, unfocused or distracted when they are trying their best when their brain switches off due to too much noise and from trying too hard to listen and cope.

APD can lead to miscommunication in any situation. It can be distressing, leaving individuals open to ridicule and embarrassment, even harassment. They can lack confidence and self-esteem, suffer from distress and anxiety when they don't understand or remember what people say to them, or follow instructions appropriately. This can adversely affect workplace performance in otherwise capable adults. They can also be perceived as antisocial because they avoid noisy environments and large groups of people that make it harder to understand what is said.

If APD is not declared, no one will know why they struggle with their job, or with workplace relationships, adding to their stress and anxiety. But it isn't all bad. Due to their difficulties, people with APD find alternative ways of doing things, and often they are more efficient ways. People with APD usually have compensatory gifts and skills. That's because of how they live their lives, finding ways around their APD, developing personal coping strategies and using their strengths. They have to be adaptable, resilient and resourceful. They can be more patient, empathetic, and observant, paying great attention to detail, some even have an incredible visual memory. Employers who support employees with these qualities will only reap the rewards.

For a person with APD to reach their potential and give their best, their working environment must be suitably and sustainably supported. APD meets the criteria of a disability in the UK in many cases. Under the Equality Act 2010 you are disabled:

“if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a 'substantial' and 'long-term' negative effect on your ability to do normal daily activities.”

<https://www.gov.uk/definition-of-disability-under-equality-act-2010>

Having a lifelong condition that renders you consistently unable to effectively communicate meets these criteria. As such, a person with APD is legally entitled to receive reasonable adjustments in the workplace to help them cope with their difficulties and compensate for what neurotypical employees without APD take for granted: being able to understand and remember what they hear and are asked to do and communicate effectively with others to do their job to the best of their ability.

Unfortunately, so many adults with APD are reluctant to declare that they even have APD. It is hard for anyone to admit they need help, especially someone who already suffers from low self-esteem, lacks confidence and fears failure. An employer cannot be expected to support an employee unless they ask for it. They must tell the employer that they have a condition that is causing them difficulties at work and when they do the employer must be willing to listen and help.

It is best to declare any diagnosis as soon as possible. Although not obliged to declare a disability, health or mental health condition, employees cannot then expect support. But employees are also entitled to reasonable adjustments if:

- they were diagnosed with a disability/chronic health condition after starting their job
- they have received additional diagnoses after starting their job
- a condition which caused them no problems earlier has become problematic
- their role and duties have changed
- they have only just felt able to discuss their disability/health condition/s with their employer and they need support.

How employers can help

Support can begin before someone joins your company, whether or not a candidate has declared their APD in the application form, or before an interview. Many companies now allow candidates to be given a short period of around fifteen minutes to read the interview questions and prepare responses in writing that they then read in response when questioned. This is particularly helpful for people with APD who can have issues with understanding what is said, remembering what was asked long enough to reply, and word retrieval issues (especially in stressful situations like a job interview). Written responses provide a visual representation of their thoughts, reduce the fear of the unexpected that so often accompanies APD, and help with auditory sequencing and memory deficits. It is also good practice to provide this for any interview.

If this is not permitted, it is useful to be aware that individuals with APD might find it hard to maintain eye contact due to visualising responses in their heads, trying to remember the question while forming an answer and finding the right words to say. These issues can also lead to a delay in responding. People with APD might also speak very loudly or quietly. This is because they can have a problem with self-regulating their speech volume due to not being able to process their own voice.

APD can also affect a person's tone of voice. All of these issues can affect others' perception of them as loud, rude or brash, or shy, withdrawn and anti-social, all of which may well be incorrect. They may also become tired if the interview is overly-long, also affecting their ability to process efficiently and affecting their response time. Also, an interview carried out in a room with a lot of background makes it harder to process speech. Visual distraction is also an issue. APD does not affect attention, but vision is the primary sense and coping strategies are normally based on that, so distraction can occur in a visually "busy" environment leaving people with APD less able to cope.

As the outcome of an interview is often based on a first impression, all these factors might work against them and can deflect the interviewer's focus from the candidate's ability and suitability for the job.

Reasonable adjustments at work

If an employee is already in post when they declare their APD (and other conditions) it is best for an appropriate line manager, Human Resources or Occupational Health/OH staff member to speak to them as early as possible, to find out the problems they're experiencing, read any reports that they provide, and ask how your company can help. They may feel low, embarrassed or vulnerable; they need to know that both they and their contribution to your company are valued and that you're prepared to do everything you can to support them to carry out their duties to the best of their ability. They also need to know that this is not an interview to determine their competency and that their job is safe. This meeting should be arranged with suitable notice. They should be notified in writing of the time date, location, who will be present and for what purpose, and they should be allowed to bring an advocate with them if required. The same applies to any work interview, whether an appraisal, disciplinary or competency hearing.

The type of support needed by an adult with APD at work will vary from one person to another, taking into account their unique APD, other difficulties, and severity, also their workplace, type of job etc. Some adults find a change of job or working situation can suddenly raise challenges they haven't encountered before; this can even alert them to the fact that they might have APD or other conditions that had not previously been problematic. Automatic coping strategies can be present from birth and can mask a lot of issues until the day they come across something unfamiliar that they can't cope with or they are overly stressed or unwell. Diagnosis is needed to identify which unique set of APD difficulties they have and what they need to support, alleviate or overcome the problems. The specialist's recommendations in their diagnosis report/s must be implemented. An assessment by an experienced OH professional can help enormously too, preferably one that is familiar with APD, and their recommendations should also be implemented if the employee feels they are useful to their particular situation.

Below are just some of the reasonable adjustments that employees with APD can find useful, according to their needs and the recommendations in their diagnosis report/s. Individuals with varying co-existing conditions might also find other adjustments and

equipment useful. For optimal results, the employee should be allowed to decide what sort of reasonable adjustments suits them best (not just what the employer suggests or insists on). Each employee with APD might need some of the following:

- assistive listening devices/ALDs (e.g., an FM system, speech recorder, speech to text software)
- items to minimise background noise (carpet/rugs, notice boards, noise-cancelling headphones/earbuds etc.)
- frequent breaks in a quiet place to avoid sensory overload; shorter meetings with a break to avoid sensory overload/exhaustion, extra time to process/prepare reports before meetings
- for video conferencing/work meetings, all necessary equipment and support should be provided e.g., subtitles, a note-taker and/or pre-printed materials before meetings plus email reminders before and minutes emailed afterwards
- lists of job-specific words/jargon and acronym explanations, also report templates
- contact via text or email instead of phones or an answerphone to record calls to play later (check about data protection on recording)
- home-working, if/when appropriate to the job plus any equipment to support this
- an alternate workplace/role, e.g., backroom tasks/administrative role etc. to avoid customer-facing duties where in-person communication issues prove insurmountable, or a quieter working environment/lone-working if applicable to avoid sensory overload and communication problems; also, a dedicated desk away from noise is far preferable to hot-desking
- reasonable adjustments for training (a reader/scribe/extra time for tests, sensory breaks, quiet room in which to take tests, preferably alone with an invigilator)
- working with employees whose pitch/voice patterns are easier to understand can help (some people with APD can have more difficulty with higher or lower-pitched voices/accents etc.) also that people speak when facing them to allow lipreading when in-person communication cannot be avoided
- flexible working hours to help employees with APD who need to block out alarms to get to sleep, leading to lateness issues

- visual fire alarms for those who wear headsets/earplugs to block ambient noise so they can work and a designated colleague to alert them
- reduced/alternate working hours such as split shifts to avoid sensory overload/sensory exhaustion
- access to counselling to help employees cope with daily stress associated with coping with APD and other conditions
- a short sensory break before their work starts to recover from the noise and stress encountered on their commute to work; also working hours at times to fit in with off-peak travel to and from work, to reduce these effects

Employers should try to accommodate staff with APD who ask to switch to a less sensory-demanding job or workplace to minimise stress/sensory overload, or who choose a new more suitable career path at the same level and provide them with suitable training. Downgrading someone due to their disability, or blocking their career progression is not just degrading: it is discrimination. They are no less capable with the right support than any other employee. Also, it is essential to consult an employee before an employer makes any change to their working hours or duties, also to gain their consent, or offer an alternative, and always arrange appropriate support in line with the changes. Their contract must also be changed accordingly and signed by them, by law.

It is also advisable that employers remind employees that they can apply to the DWP "Access to work" scheme for a grant to help employers to pay for practical support at work. <https://www.gov.uk/access-to-work>

Conclusion

Employers can make it easier for employees with invisible disabilities if they foster a workplace culture that shows that they are aware that their conditions exist. It would help to demonstrate that they are accepting of disabled employees and welcome declarations of any condition. If they showed a willingness to support their employees, those employees would be more likely to ask for help when they know they will receive

it, without detriment to their work prospects. This will result in a better working life and increased productivity. Such an attitude to disability would also be more likely to exist among their colleagues too if an example was set by their employer of a safe, positive and welcoming environment, and if regulations prohibiting harassment and discrimination were actively enforced.

It is so important that employers eliminate the unconscious bias that already exists in too many companies by normalising support for disabled workers. All companies must provide a transparent disability policy by law (as they must with bullying/harassment and complaints) stating that all disabled employees are treated fairly and equally, and that appropriate, reasonable adjustments will be put in place. However, not all companies provide these policies or implement them. It is in every employer's best interest to protect the rights of their employees (and failure to do so can lead to litigation for disability discrimination and constructive dismissal).

With the right support and simple adjustments, all of these issues can be mitigated, employees with APD can perform their duties as easily as their colleagues, and experience better working relationships. APD is an invisible disability. But that doesn't mean that it should be ignored.

Further information

APD Support UK is the only organisation that is dedicated to supporting individuals and families affected with APD and their families. Information on APD for parents and adults are available on the APD Support UK website, along with details of diagnosis, books and other blog pieces. <https://apdsupportuk.yolasite.com/> They include:

- A brief factsheet which you can put up on your notice boards with information on APD symptoms. Please share. <https://apdsupportuk.yolasite.com/about-apd.php>
- Details of diagnosis <https://apdsupportuk.yolasite.com/diagnosis.php>
- Online support groups. <https://apdsupportuk.yolasite.com/support.php>
- A page for adults with APD <https://apdsupportuk.yolasite.com/adults.php>