

Business education

Data analytics course for people with Asperger's proves a good fit

A team of psychiatrists, neuropsychologists and coaches help prepare students better for the workplace



Laurence Sirac felt relief when she was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome © Felix Ledru/FT

Jonathan Moules YESTERDAY

Greta Thunberg, the climate activist, considers her Asperger syndrome a “superpower”. For most other people diagnosed with the condition it is a challenge — especially at work.

When Laurence Sirac was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome her first reaction was relief. “Finally I had an explanation about what was going wrong with me,” the 50-year-old recalls about that day eight years ago. “It was the reassurance that I was not insane.”

Asperger's, as the condition is more commonly known, is a form of autism associated with advanced cognitive abilities as well as specific interests or repetitive behaviours.

Ms Sirac had sought psychological help after a string of sackings from business development and sales roles at technology and consultancy companies. “I was good at my core job, getting new business,” she says. “The problem was that I could not imagine what happened next after I had done my task, so I was bringing in more customers than the associates providing the work could cope with.”

In France, where Ms Sirac lives, about 700,000 people are [diagnosed with autism](#), more than one in 100 of the population, and the prevalence of the condition is fairly similar in other [countries](#). But many of those diagnosed with it struggle to integrate into the workplace. Just 16 per cent of autistic adults in the UK are in full-time paid employment, according to British charity the [National Autistic Society](#).

Asperger's can be an advantage in certain jobs, particularly those involving data analysis, such as spotting flaws in software programmes. But conventional recruitment practices work against those with the condition, according to Emma Kearns, head of enterprise and employment at the National Autistic Society.

“Employers often assess people by how they respond to unpredictable questions, from an interview panel they've never met, in an unfamiliar environment, sometimes surrounded by noise and bright lights,” Ms Kearns says. “These are all things autistic people can struggle with.”

Being diagnosed with Asperger's was a catalyst for Ms Sirac to change careers, and for her this has proved very successful. First, she retrained as a life coach for people with Asperger's, which led to a job in the careers department of [Grenoble Ecole de Management](#). She then became programme director for what Grenoble claims is a first in business education: a data analytics course designed specifically for people with Asperger's.

Ms Sirac points out that people with the condition are blessed with extreme discipline and analytical abilities that are key to tasks such as spotting flaws in software programs and data analysis. This makes them ideal candidates for the increasing number of technology jobs.

The certificated course, created in partnership with [Grenoble Institute of Engineering](#) and online training provider [Campus Numérique in the Alps](#), draws on the curriculum for the business school's masters degree in big data with additional support from specialist career coaches.

But it breaks with the conventions of French business education because applicants are not required to hold any formal qualifications. Ms Sirac felt this was important given that people with Asperger's often struggle with formal education. Instead candidates are chosen based on competence tests set by her and the other course organisers.

The first intake of 28 students, ranging in age from 18 to 47, started at Grenoble in January. Some had already obtained masters degrees but three had no formal qualifications. On average each student had experienced unemployment for at least two years.

To keep tuition fees down to €5,000 per person, the school underwrote €120,000 of the €380,000 course cost. Nevertheless, paying for the course was an issue for most and all but four of those enrolled were also given financial aid by the school.

Many students had applied purely because they knew the teaching would be tailored for people with Asperger's, according to Ms Sirac. She claims that the school could have enrolled many more people if it had had the resources. “We had thousands of calls,” she says. “People told me they would have applied whatever we were teaching because they really needed something that understood their situation.”

Ms Sirac admits that she was helped by being in the right place at the right time. In March 2014, Grenoble rebranded itself from a business school to a “school for business and society”, and the

board of directors sought the views of staff and local employers on what teaching programmes could be developed to further this goal. “Everyone was asked to think about what we could do for society.”

“We knew employers needed people for data jobs and people with Asperger’s were very familiar with computers, so someone said why don’t we match both of them.” The curriculum was built with the help of a team of eight psychiatrists, neuropsychologists and coaching experts that specialise in working with people with Asperger’s, who supported students throughout their studies.

Only 13 of the first intake progressed sufficiently to earn a graduation certificate this July. However, a total of 16 students were subsequently hired, either by large multinationals, such as SAP, Modis and Veolia, tech start-ups or public sector bodies. Even those who did not find work got the benefit of professional support, according to Ms Sirac. “Several students told me afterwards that it really gave them hope,” she says.

Some employers were already searching for autistic talent. Microsoft, for example, has an [Autism Hiring Program](#) for jobs such as software or lab engineer, data analyst and data scientist in the US. The scheme is part of the company’s inclusive hiring practices policy, but it makes sense commercially because people with autism display a more rigorous approach to analysing data — an essential skill in these roles.

Many still struggle to see Asperger’s and autism in a positive light. Comparisons with *Rain Man*, the 1988 film starring Dustin Hoffman as an autistic savant, are unhelpful. “Everyone is different,” Ms Sirac says. “We need to inform, to communicate about it in a positive way.”

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