

SUBMISSION FROM JAMES CHRISTIE

1. My name is James Christie, I have Asperger Syndrome, and my particular developmental disability comprises a massive deficit in my information processing ability. What this means is that while my output (ie verbal articulacy and writing ability) is very superior (in the top 1% of the population), my input (ie the ability to take in and comprehend information) is extremely poor. I am in fact outperformed by 96% of the population, which puts me in the same range as someone with a learning disability. I am not *learning* disabled (I have a high IQ and excellent writing ability) but *developmentally* disabled, but that's not much consolation, especially as current services for the learning disabled would not be of any help.
2. Knowing my own intelligence and ability, it has therefore been extremely depressing to be unable to join the workforce except at a very low level because of my inability to cope with large amounts of input, to multi-task effectively, and/or easily to socialise. Despite proven writing ability of a very high order, I have had to endure years of feeling like an underperformer, struggling to stay in employment and unable to use my talent.
3. For example, I was picked as a journalism trainee by a major publisher on the strength of my writing, but only lasted a month as I could not learn shorthand, could not understand the multiple intricacies of libel law, could not work well under pressure and could not do six things at once. My confidence was destroyed and I was left deeply disillusioned and frustrated. I retrained as a librarian and entered a "profession" with no job prospects and an obsession with courses and qualifications, qualifications, qualifications... I had periods of unemployment, and ended up cleaning toilets for a living at the age of forty.
4. While I am responsible for myself and my mistakes, I have spent nearly 25 years struggling to stay in work while being talked down to by managements who thought they knew it all but didn't, and struggling with a hidden problem I didn't know I had.
5. At least now I do know, but there is an awful lack of awareness and/or understanding about autism in society and in the workplace. One comment I particularly dislike is "*oh everyone's a bit like that...*" and in some cases, attitudes toward myself and other Autists remain fixed and intolerant.
6. I am therefore very much in agreement with the general principles of the Autism (Scotland) Bill, and I must stress that this Bill is absolutely necessary because, in my experience, even in the public sector, the gap between the theory of equality, anti-discrimination and other legislation aimed at meeting the needs of the disadvantaged and/or disabled and the reality in practise often fails to meet expectations.

7. The Bill's provisions, namely provision of autism strategy, guidance, and the obligation to have regard to this guidance, are unquestionably necessary because, across the public sector, managers need to understand how to alter processes and behaviours to include people with autism. In my experience, the lack of understanding about autism causes some people to come across as intolerant and unwelcoming towards Autists. It is very difficult to challenge this kind of behaviour and many become defensive.
8. At a recent meeting, I was irked to hear that public sector managers are claiming that they are making "great strides forward" re equality etc.
9. I have seen in person and heard in general that these "great strides" are more like tiny reluctant shuffles when it comes to understanding autism, and that the claims of equality trumpeted so loudly often don't apply to the way Autists actually experience services.
10. In my own case, despite notifying a recent employer in writing that I had Asperger Syndrome before I took up my post, I was nearly driven into a nervous breakdown by a wilful lack of understanding about my autism. The management completely failed to alter or change any of the workplace attitudes or behaviour which caused this, and tried to blame me for everything.
11. I do not believe that the next autistic employee to join the organisation concerned will fare any better, and in general I am deeply concerned that many employees with an autism spectrum disorder will continue to be bullied and/or harassed. We often suffer in silence because our autism makes it much harder for us to relate our experiences and when we do speak out we are perceived to be causing trouble and accused of being inflexible.
12. Hence the unquestionable need for local authorities and NHS bodies to have regard to this guidance re provision of relevant services for Autists, because they certainly didn't regard them for me!
13. In general, the Autism Bill is necessary because, in certain areas (and no, it's *not* just a minority!), we have failed to create an inclusive, reasonable and tolerant environment for people with autism. Managers need to be empowered to develop their staff, but have too often hidden behind employment legislation and made excuses like "they've got poor educational qualifications" and "they don't know any better" when responding to the needs of Autists requires so much more.
14. The excuses quoted above were made to me by a senior manager.

15. In short, without the Autism Bill there will not, from our point of view, be any real change to our society nor any progress towards true equality.
16. Oh brave new world, that 'neath the surface seems so much like the old one!

James Christie
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