

Beta talent forward

By Professor Jan Willem de Graaf

Professor of Brain and Technology, Saxion University of Applied Sciences, Deventer, Netherlands

After more than a year in our Beta talent project, a characteristic of the candidates seems to be more common than any other: a lack of confidence in working in teams. The project is intended for people within the autistic spectrum with excellent (cognitive) competencies, who nevertheless cannot find or keep a job. At first I was inclined to view the problem primarily as a problem of the current social structure of labour. Admittedly, many candidates are original thinkers who are not always willing to let go of their own way of thinking to go along with those of others. At the same time, using the power of teamwork has become much more prominent today than when I was young.

From a very young age, collaboration and finding solutions in groups is already part of the educational programme. Our candidates are often specialists in independent thinking and working on their own. Because this is being asked so little now - work is mainly done in 'teams' - they tend to stand still. But when ultimately something individually challenging is asked for, they do not know how to stop. They're running into extremes. In standing still their motivation "leaks" away and they fail, concluding that they have poor planning skills. Most candidates have learned to put the blame on their "autism". But is that right?

Here I am inclined to a rather cowardly answer: yes and no. First the no. If craftsmanship in the field of thinking (philosophy, logic, mathematics) and design (STEM: science, technology, engineering and mathematics) would be seen as mainly individually developable complex skills, as it was in the past, poor planning skills (and side effects like failing self-care and regulation) would largely disappear as snow in the sun.

But honestly, in some of our autistic candidates the willingness / ability to share with the other team members is much too small. Of course there are always isolated geniuses that generate world-shaking innovations from scratch. But more than ever before we live in a network society. If the candidates really increased their willingness to form a team together, they would have much more success in the area of labour (re)integration. And when I look at myself from this point of view, I must admit my own tendency to work on my own, writing columns, even recording music albums mostly on my own, while I now see the fun of cooperation. We work together in the beta-talent project and I think it is one of the most beautiful projects I've worked on so far. How is it possible that this is so difficult for our candidates, the reduced need to share in a team and the high need to be appreciated?

It is a vicious circle. Suppose you're an autistic genius. You are valued for your "talent", for example your ability to formalize problems. You have invested a lot of time and energy to reach your current level. With these typical "autistiform" specialisms this means you've spent a lot of time in isolation. You've never learned to trust in teams and now you must hope that the team will accept and respect you. Many team members are so socially competent that they take good care of themselves and thereby act as if they put the interests of the team first.

Of course you do not understand this social "game" yet. You see 'macho' team members who claim your earnings for themselves, which makes you both angry and insecure. Until you scream that the other person shows off with your feathers. And that is, again cowardly formulated, as true as false. You have proven to the team that you are "just" a nerd with an autistic "meltdown". And you have proven to yourself that the team can not be trusted. How can we change this?

“But more than ever before we live in a network society. If the candidates really increased their willingness to form a team together, they would have much more success in the area of labour (re)integration.”