

We're wasting the talents of autistic people

Businesses weed out potential employees

who have similar qualities to teenage climate activist

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Teenagers have been talking about the planet since Woodstock, but somehow the planet never found one as persuasive as Greta Thunberg. On Tuesday the young climate activist met most of Britain's party leaders and on Wednesday she adorned nearly every front page. But the solemn-eyed 16-year-old has been advancing another cause, too, however unintentionally. She has become an advocate for autism.

"It makes me different, and being different is a gift," she said, talking of her Asperger syndrome. "I don't easily fall for lies, I can see through things. If I would've been like everyone else, I wouldn't have started this school strike, for instance."

You can see why she views her condition as helpful to her mission. Her effectively blunt delivery, her attention to figures, her refusal to be flattered away from her point or to defer to important-sounding adults: autism has carried her past traps into which others have fallen. The cause of autistics has had many possible figureheads — Albert Einstein, Steve Jobs, James Joyce, Charles Darwin, Emily Dickinson — it's a wonder it hasn't capsized. Yet somehow it badly needs more of them.

There are around 700,000 autistic

people in Britain; that's about one in 100, although estimates rise with every count. Some will have unusual talents: 10 per cent of those diagnosed, studies show, have some extraordinary skill which you wouldn't predict from their IQ. Scientists put this down to an intense focus on detail, a "starting engine", they call it, for mastering the piano, or algebra, or engines. Many also have a better memory than the rest of us. They can concentrate better too.

But the bulk of these beautiful minds are wasted. Just 32 per cent of autistic adults are in paid work. The condition is on a wide spectrum: some can barely speak, and will always need full-time care. But around half are of average or above average intelligence. Most of the unemployed — 77 per cent of them — would like a job. No one will give them one. A major hurdle is the interview, which

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screens most out. Interviewers look for social skills, and there autistic people perform badly. They often have difficulty with eye contact or making chit-chat, and they have the unfortunate tendency to be honest about their abilities, rather than say, airily assuring the panel they speak fluent French. Mentioning the condition at all puts employers off.

The office has its own superficial hurdles for autistics, who tend to find bright lights, chatter and ringing phones distracting and

unpleasant. There is also straight-up discrimination. Slurs such as “on the spectrum” still linger in the language, at a time when ridiculing mental health is rightly seen as beyond the pale. In this way, autistic people are shifted out of the workforce.

This must change. It is a terrible squandering of talent. Aside from their unusual skills, autistic people tend to make rather good employees, once they find the right niche. They prefer routine, meaning they are more likely to turn up on time and less likely to quit. They are more honest than others. They tend not to bully and they don't gossip by the water cooler. They quietly get on with their work.

It is also a squandering of cash. The country spends a lot of money supporting autistic children through their education. It makes little financial sense to abandon them to a life of unemployment once they hit 18. A 2014 study by the London School of Economics found autism costs the country at least £32 billion a year, more than heart disease, stroke and cancer combined. Among the chief drains was the “opportunity cost” of autism — the lost salaries of autistic people out of work, and the money required to support them.

It is odd that little has been done to help autistic people into work, particularly when you consider how much this would improve those workplaces. Doing away with interviews, for example. These are barriers to talented autistic people but they are often also barriers to finding talented people in general. Studies have shown that free-form chats are useless as a hiring

technique because people tend to vastly overestimate their ability to “work someone out” over a ten-minute coffee. For the kinds of technical jobs autistic people excel at, such as coding, interviews are particularly irrelevant; it's rather like appointing the Royal Ballet's principal on the basis of who can down a pint the fastest.

Managers of autistic employees also tend to find themselves having to learn to make instructions clearer and to take blunt feedback: no bad thing in a nation for whom David Brent struck an instant chord. Autistic people are a straightforward lot too, meaning company atmospheres of politicking and blame-shifting are difficult to maintain.

Some good work is being done. A “neurodiversity” drive in various British companies has helped. However, firms should beware appearing to parade their autistic employees to burnish their credentials. No one likes to suspect they have not been selected on merit. Surely better, with so many benefits to hiring autistic people, to make the application process smoother.

The most likely direction of progress probably lies somewhere between the two. Pressure from activists has made autism hiring programmes more popular: Procter & Gamble recently joined with the National Autistic Society to select two autistic interns, based on a series of engineering challenges. When they saw the quality of the candidates, they chose a third. Give them a chance and autistic people will shine.

Jenni Russell is away