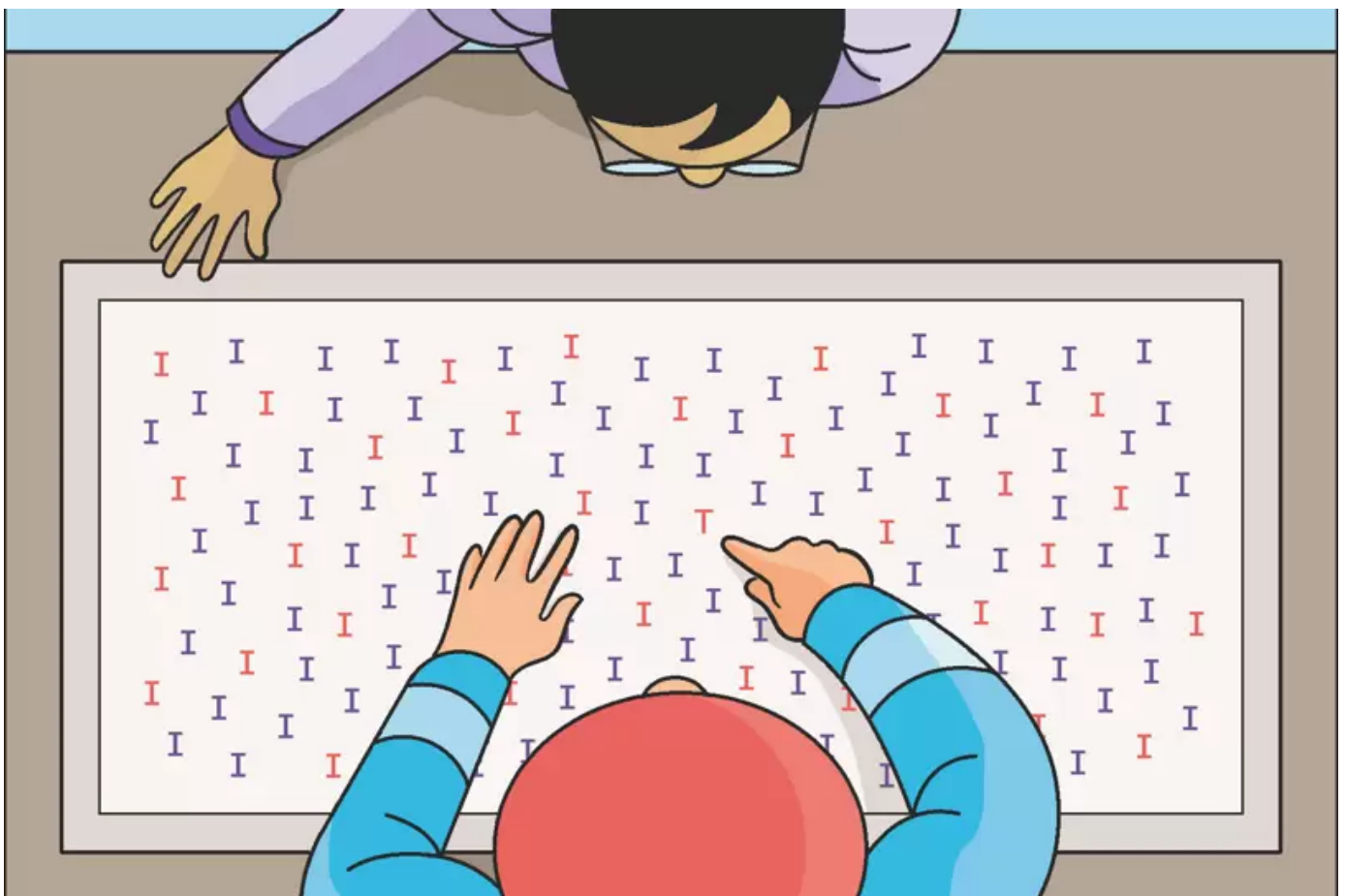


Startups

Why you should hire an autistic person right now

Autistic people have been overlooked too often because employers can't see past social skills. That is a big mistake

By **SIMON BARON-COHEN**
03 Jan 2020



Credit **Nick D Burton**

In 2020, there will be a sea change in how autistic people are treated in professional settings. As companies are increasingly celebrate diversity in the workplace – diversity of gender, ethnicity and ability – this will extend

detail. Anecdotally, there are autistic children who can complete 1,000-piece jigsaw puzzles with the picture-side face down, just through focusing on the shapes. This suggests a talent, sometimes called a savant skill, in both perception of and memory for detail.

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Group studies conducted by psychologists have confirmed these anecdotes. In the [Embedded Figures Test](#), in which subjects have to find a target shape within a larger design, autistic people, both children and adults, perform faster and more accurately than non-autistic (“neurotypical”) people. In visual-search tests, where subjects have to find a target stimulus in a large display of close imposters (such as finding a letter T among a sea of letter Is), autistic people are also faster and more accurate than neurotypical people.

This remarkable attention to detail is basically excellent pattern recognition and it appears to stem from systemising, an evolved function in the human brain that helps us understand how things work by analysing a system in terms of its underlying rules.

Like any skill, systemising occurs on a bell curve in the population, with some people being faster at spotting patterns than others. Autistic people are often strong systemisers. Indeed their attention is often described as “obsessive” as they check and recheck the patterns of a system.

This important skill has a number of benefits in the workplace. Autistic peoples’ excellent attention to detail means they may make fewer mistakes, and their narrow focus may mean that they are not satisfied until a task is completed. The high levels of honesty and loyalty that are closely associated with autism are obviously desirable qualities, too.

Yet, despite these strengths, autistic people experience high levels of unemployment, primarily because many jobs require strong social and communication skills to get through the interview stage. In 2020 we will see companies encouraging autistic applicants to apply to work for them and recruitment processes being modified to meet their needs. There are several reasons why this will be a welcome development. Firstly, it extends the basic human right to work and employment. Secondly, employment is closely correlated with good mental health, and autistic people often suffer from poor mental health, most likely because of forms of social exclusion.

Remarkable strengths in pattern recognition may be reserved for their benefit and the benefit of all in society.

Simon Baron-Cohen is professor of developmental psychopathology and director of the Autism Research Centre at Cambridge University

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