

Gifted adults in work

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SUMMARY

Gifted adults (people with a very high intelligence; 2% of the population) sometimes are not able to function adequately at work. Their high intelligence can cause them to dysfunction when adapting to the work situation, sometimes leading to absenteeism and disability. Hardly any scientific research on this topic has been performed.

This article describes some characteristics of gifted people. The problems at work are explained using examples from the work floor. Based on certain characteristics and signals, occupational health physicians and insurance doctors are able to recognize giftedness and to bring the subject out into the open. The solution can lie in a change in the job requirements or working conditions; medical or psychotherapeutic treatment is then rendered unnecessary. When their motivation is restored, people with very high intelligence are capable of high-quality work and of solving complex problems. Thus, a gifted employee who is not functioning as required becomes a valued worker providing a unique contribution at work.

INTRODUCTION

It is increasingly being realized that gifted individuals have the capacity to help solve complex problems¹. Many are functioning at a high level. But just like a number of gifted schoolchildren, some gifted employees do not function adequately and are unhappy as a result². Some become ill and even permanently occupationally disabled. What are the characteristics of the problems of the gifted at work. And what can occupational health physicians and insurance doctors do with this information?

To illustrate our point, we present two case studies.

CASE STUDY 1

Alice Wismeijer is a 38-year-old woman. She works as a researcher for a government service and has gained many qualifications through self-study in the evenings. She functions well in her work. However, a colleague has been bullying her for years. She tries to ignore this and hardly ever reports sick for work. One day, it all becomes too much for her. The occupational health physician diagnoses a burn-out. She becomes long-term sick. She goes in search of therapy, in the course of which much suffering during her youth is revealed. After a year, an occupational disability examination assesses that she is able to do work of a simple nature for 20 hours a week. Alice has the impression that she is very intelligent and knows that she will not be able to perform simple work for a lengthy period of time. However, she does not dare to voice her belief about this. During the surgery hours of the occupational health physician she bursts into terrible bouts of crying and the occupational health physician doesn't know how to help her. The reintegration process fails.

CASE STUDY 2

Joost Bakker is a 42-year-old automation expert. He suffers from neck problems, as a result of which he regularly stays off work. The occupational health physician has a lengthy interview

with him. Joost is rather anxious and very preoccupied with his health. Additionally, he appears to be quite lonely, has little contact with his colleagues. He functions adequately, his manager is happy with him. The occupational health physician suggests that Joost be examined by a psychologist specialized in work-related problems at the working conditions service. After completing a detailed anamnesis, the psychologist performs a number of tests. The results show that Joost scores very high in analytical thinking, amongst other areas. Joost tells the psychologist that he had been tested at high school but that his parents had refused to tell him the results of the tests. The tests and interview do not reveal any severe problems. The psychologist advises Joost to request information from Mensa*, a worldwide association for very intelligent people. He overcomes his initial resistance to the idea and follows the advice. Based on the results of the tests he had already undergone, he is accepted as a member. He acknowledges a lot of what is contained in the documentation that he receives. Within the association, he establishes several valuable contacts. A year later, the occupational health physician observes that Joost appears to be relaxed. He still suffers from neck problems, but he hardly ever reports sick. He has started studying again and is happy with the advice the psychologist gave him.

A generally accepted definition of “gifted” does not exist³. According to the definition used by Mensa, this means having an IQ that lies in the uppermost 2%, scored on an approved IQ test. Depending on the kind of test, this is an IQ ranging between 140 and 150.

There are many kinds of intelligences. Gardner distinguishes eight: verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, musical, bodily, naturalistic, emotional and intrapersonal⁴. The two last-named intelligences are sometimes referred to by others as emotional intelligence. The most attention in the literature and in tests is paid to the first three mentioned intelligences.

The usual intelligence tests do not seem to predict work performance very accurately⁵. How effectively someone will be able to solve problems in the real world is determined not only by intelligence, but also by the knowledge and skills that that individual has acquired³. The environment (parents, school, etc) also plays a role in an individual’s development⁶.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE GIFTED

Although of course all gifted individuals are unique, they do share certain characteristics. Some of these are present naturally, others have come into existence gradually through interaction with the environment. Cause and effect can therefore not always be distinguished from each other.

Speed of thinking. Gifted individuals think more quickly than others. They make many mental switches, associate rapidly and give the impression that they jump from one subject to the next.

High sensitivity. A higher development potential often is accompanied by high sensitivity⁷. This high sensitivity manifests itself in different areas: psychomotoric, sensorial, intellectual, imaginative, emotional,⁷ and can resemble ADHD.

Over-stimulation of the senses manifests itself audibly (machines, radios, smacking lips), visually (light sources) or sense of touch (certain fabrics, labels in clothing, or touching). Currently, there is a high level of interest being shown in high sensitivity in general⁸.

Introversion. The internal world of the gifted is particularly well-developed. They are quickly and easily hurt, which is why they tend to keep people at a distance. Some avoid parties and

suchlike since the topics of conversation do not interest them. This can resemble autism⁹. Introversion can also arise through having the feeling of being rejected. People with high IQs would seem to have difficulty meeting like-minded people, which can quickly lead them to become isolated¹⁰.

Emotional development. Many gifted individuals feel emotions strongly. But because cognitive thinking dominates and provides safety, emotional development remains relatively underdeveloped. They have difficulty in linking feelings and reason. This can be reinforced when an individual has felt lonely from a young age. For example, when the environment does not acknowledge or recognize the child as being gifted. Fortunately, the emotional development of many gifted individuals has progressed well.

Creativity. The thought processes of the gifted differ from those of average intelligence: they are more global in nature and with a strong capacity for imagination. Averagely intelligent people can often not follow their train of thought. They can identify patterns quickly, so that they can, for example, predict trends successfully. They can often draw conclusions intuitively¹¹. This creativity is often frustrated by the regular education system.

Independence. The forming of judgments and opinions often takes place autonomously. They are non-conformist and therefore display what teachers easily label as ‘inappropriate behavior’¹¹. This independence accompanies the creativity mentioned above. They often have an aversion to non-democratic authority¹².

Perfectionism. Perfectionism is often accompanied by having too high expectations of others, but also with shame, guilt feelings and feelings of inferiority through not being able to meet their own high expectations^{9,13}. This leads to tension and occasionally ‘paralysis’.

Learning style. The learning style of the gifted is often exploratory. They have an extreme dislike of learning lists, they find it uninteresting and become bored¹². Often, they do not understand the teacher’s questions or the questions in the text books, because they are looking for things that aren’t there. This leads to frustration. Some gifted adults lack basic knowledge but have a lot of knowledge in areas that they are interested in. They often fail to develop learning strategies because they never learn from their failures⁹.

Fear of failure and under-performing. If their intelligence is not stimulated, children often develop bad working habits¹⁴. They sometimes think that they are stupid, become afraid of failure and start under-performing⁹. Their motivation to learn decreases. This can result later in frustrations and disappointments in their career.

THE GIFTED AND PROBLEMS AT WORK

Little research has been done concerning how being gifted manifests itself in the arena of work and how the gifted individual experiences this. One of the authors (FC) worked for a lengthy period as P&O advisor in an environment where many gifted employees worked. He discovered a surprising parallel between the gifted and artists. Both often find it difficult to develop their own talents unless certain strange conditions are met. Inspiration and motivation would appear to be more significant factors than knowledge and ability¹⁵.

In addition, we have collected career histories of Mensa members, amongst others, and from our own practice. Based on all this, we present in table 1 a number of characteristic statements, from the perspective of both the employee and the environment. If three or more

of these characteristics are present, the possibility should be considered that being gifted is a reason for an employee experiencing adaptation problems at work.

Table 1
Characteristic statements made by gifted employees and people in their working environment concerning adaptation problems

What the working environment notices	What the employee states
1 Many conflicts with management and authorities	I have a great sense of justice
2 Cannot listen to what others say	My ideas are not understood, but I'm usually right
3 Difficult to place motives. What's behind it all?	Apparently I'm a threat to my colleagues
4 Bad timekeeping, for example in meetings	I'm being held back all the time, it all goes so slowly
5 Strongly fluctuating performance, without any clear cause	I have no idea what I want, I find almost everything interesting
6 Not clear where the employee's optimal work position is; concerns him/herself with all kinds of things	I get too little appreciation, people don't see what I'm capable of
7 Lack of perseverance and discipline	I'm easily distracted
8 Is difficult to approach, not social	I dislike social talk
9 Makes all kinds of demands concerning work environment factors	I can't understand how other people can work in that noise

The differences between the left- and right-hand columns highlight the adaptation and communication problems. Gifted individuals who dysfunction are often not aware of their own intelligence, which results in them interpreting the lack of knowledge of others as unwillingness¹⁶. They become irritated and often start going too fast. Additionally, there is a tendency to focus on the content, rather than on issues such as enthusiasm and motivation². On the other hand, they try sometimes to adapt too much, which can result in a general dissatisfaction, and the job profiling is not clear enough to allow them to take on suitable tasks.

Advisory functions, creative professions and specialist functions in, for example, the legal, medical, technological, educational science, PR or journalism sectors are often well-suited, just as setting up an own business¹⁷. The manager or supervisor should focus on goals and results rather than the method to be followed (the so-called compass approach)¹. Given this approach, the gifted individual can provide a unique contribution to, for example, strategy, problem-solving, trend watching and product development.

CARE PROVISION

Recognizing one's own giftedness often is an important step toward improving one's functioning. Based on his experiences with coaching and career counseling, one of the authors (FC) distinguishes here five, often unconscious, strategies, see table 2¹⁸. Upon being published, this list provoked twenty responses from individuals belonging to the target group, all stating that they recognized much of what was in the list. Development often takes place from one strategy to the other. Occasionally, in different environments, different strategies are applied alongside each other.

Table 2
Strategies of the gifted with respect to life and career

Strategy	Place of giftedness in life and career
Inconspicuous	Keeps a low profile, which results in personal development being restricted. Often not aware of high intelligence: considers him/herself rather stupid. Functions in simple jobs. Upon becoming aware of their giftedness, can develop to one of the other types.
Accepted	Has established a connection with other people at his/her own level at an early stage, which acts as a stimulus. Has not had any major adaptation problems and has gone through a normal personal development. Works, for example, in a gifted environment (Whiz kids? Specialized researcher?), as advisor with a unique task within a unique company, or starts up a business.
Social	Has discovered through experience that you can't achieve anything with intelligence alone. Has actively raised his/her social skills to a high level. Is therefore able to solve many adaptation problems. Often functions well in jobs that are intrinsically multidisciplinary in character.
Confrontational	Has a checkered career history. From conflict to conflict and occasionally even from dismissal to dismissal. Tries to survive by placing the emphasis on the quality of the work. Can progress to 'Social' or may find him/herself in 'Isolation'.
Isolation	Operates almost exclusively in a state of isolation. Runs the risk of losing contact with society.

Currently, several psychologists, coaches and career counselors have specialized in gifted adults. They are able to point out specific characteristics and indicate points of application for developments. And they will be less inclined to make an incorrect pathological judgment. Furthermore, they understand that, despite the fact that the gifted are able to think well and very quickly, this does not apply to the control over their own development or their own career.

Psychologist Hans de Vries ¹⁹ gives some practical tips in his book with regard to coming into better contact with everyday life and thereby with society. One such tip is ‘Don’t do it’ as the theme for avoiding becoming involved too quickly and with too many things. Corten emphasizes the importance of self-management with regard to one’s career ⁵: the gifted show, by nature, a tendency to reason rationally based on what they are able to do, what needs to be done, and which specific circumstances this demands. And, subsequently, to be surprised or disappointed when they discover that this does not automatically lead to them connecting well with their work environment. Contact with their own feelings, with that which they really want and whereby they become motivated, appears often to be a better basis for contact with colleagues and profiling in the work environment than real qualities.

What can occupational health physicians and insurance doctors do with this knowledge? If they recognize or suspect the patterns described in a client, they can first of all discuss this with their client. Preferably with some measure of discretion, considering the fact that being gifted does not always provoke positive associations in the Netherlands. Sometimes the client will know already what he or she needs to do, in which case some light supervision will be adequate.

If necessary, they can request a psychological test (with special attention for the intelligence aspect) or specifically refer the client to a care provider with experience in this area. As so often is the case, intervention at an early stage can prevent much suffering, and much can be achieved with relatively simple resources. Particularly if the employee learns to develop and profile him/herself more according to motivation and interests, many problems can be resolved. The result for employer and society can be highly valued and motivated employees.

FINALLY

The most important sources for this article, apart from the literature mentioned, have been experiences with clients. Experiences and insights gained within Mensa Nederland and, of course, our own life experiences. We hope that researchers are interested in following up this line of research. This in order to make more optimal use of the talents of the gifted. The insights gained, however, will also benefit others: methods for, for example, self-study, that work well for the gifted have proven to be just as enriching and fascinating for others. We would be very interested in hearing your reactions to this subject based on your own professional experience.

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NOTE

* See www.Mensa.nl

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TRANSLATION (FROM DUTCH)

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