



## CAMPUS

19 mei 2014 - 00:00

# “Autism is not always just a problem”

Five years ago, TU alumnus Diederik Weve, 56, learnt that he had Asperger syndrome, a form of autism. It was only then that the pieces of the jigsaw fell into place - and now, at Shell, he has what could be described as a campaigning role.

### The wrong thing to say

"Something happened to me about fifteen years ago... I studied chemical technology in Delft, and about fifteen years after leaving, I was walking over the Schie bridge when I met a former fellow student by chance. In all that time, we had never seen each other, and we talked for a while. After a time, he said: "Well, I'll see you!" And I answered: "I don't think so." It was only a quarter of an hour later that I realised his reaction was slightly odd. And it was only two weeks later that I thought, 'hmm, it was the wrong thing to say on my part.' It was only after ten years had passed, when I was diagnosed with Asperger's, that I really understood his reaction."

### Limitations?

"When you get that kind of diagnosis when you're 51, there is so much that you start to think about. Handicapped? Limitations? Is that what everyone thinks? Even if I have continued to work all that time? And if I am successful, how am I limited? I took a look at DSM-IV, the bible of psychologists and psychiatrists who establish whether you have a mental condition. Under 'intelligence' it has 'see educationally sub-normal'. So the medical vision of intelligence concerns where it causes problems. Autism is defined by doctors, and intelligence by people seeking to optimise the labour process. Everybody sees autism only as a problem. Yes, it can bring problems, but not by definition. First and foremost, autism means perceiving things differently and therefore responding differently and understanding things differently. That sometimes causes problems. But not always."

### Studies

"I actually did well at my studies. I graduated in seven years and did everything through my own efforts. Planning was a disaster - I did my work at the last moment. I was lucky in that I was able to live in student accommodation fairly quickly, a kind of living room. It

was very much like being at home, because I come from a large family. I did not need to work hard to make social contacts. I was also a member of a student association and I was studying. My job application was successful thanks to the professor who was my graduation supervisor, otherwise I don't think I would have been able to join Shell. Nowadays, if you tell Shell during a job interview that you have autism and that you would like them to take account of the fact, they will. That will probably mean a phone call for me: 'Diederik, can you advise us?'"

### **Ill-at-ease**

"On my first day at work, I made a few embarrassing mistakes, and even though I was friendly and cheerful to my colleagues, I did not know how to deal with new contacts. There were weekly drinks gatherings and I felt very ill-at-ease. I did not know what was expected of me. How do you talk with colleagues if there is nothing to talk about? I failed to motivate my assistants to do what I wanted. During the first evaluation I carried out, I reduced one of the interviewees to tears. With the best of intentions, I had given him an honest evaluation without realising how hard he would take it. That is something I only understood after my diagnosis."

### **Fellow auties**

"When I started to look for people with autism at Shell, I did not find very many - one in the Netherlands. If one percent of all employees have autism, that means there are one thousand people at Shell who have it. Most do not know it, or they do not wish to. People are not particularly inclined to look for characteristics that have a negative connotation. There are therefore relatively few older people who have been diagnosed. If you want to meet others who have been diagnosed with autism, you are more likely to do so among teenagers and those in their twenties. Of course, that is not a representative group, because we know that autism is not just a recent phenomenon or something that just goes away. There are too few examples of adults with autism in our society. I am one of them, now 56 years old."

### **Socially active**

"I always thought that I would be an engineer till the day I die. Oddly enough, so much more has happened following my Asperger's diagnosis. At Shell I started the 'autism as diversity' project. I became a member of the 'from an autistic perspective' ministerial working group (VAB), and I am now an autism ambassador. Being socially active is not something you expect from someone with autism. At the same time, it is proof that even those with autism - or precisely those with autism - have a great deal of development potential. Only a few things are needed for development - the knowledge that there is something you don't know, and the opportunity to explore that."

### **Out of the closet**

"I refer to the project at Shell informally as 'auties out of the closet': they are there, but

they dare not go public with the fact. To me, it is very like the pink network. Being gay or lesbian - there too, you see something akin to shame or fear. You may consider yourself normal and you may think you are fine with it, but you prefer not to be open about it, because you never know whether people will understand or use it against you. So you have to look at autism in a different way. The first person I heard communicate about it in a positive way was Peter Vermeulen, a Flemish psychologist, researcher and treatment officer at Autisme Centraal. It is not the limitations that he compares, but the strengths of people with and without autism."

### **Strengths and weaknesses**

"In a group of around fifteen colleagues, we had to evaluate each other according to the model of Belbin's Team Roles. What was the result? I was creative and orthodox, but was not a communicator at all. That is correct. From the time of my first evaluation at Shell in 1983, it was a case of, 'does not communicate, should go on a course'. That stayed the same for a long time, and they eventually gave up on me. And then the diagnosis came five years ago. I understand now what communication is. For the rest, I was strategic, balanced, a pure observer, but I was unable to inspire others. I did not know how to get on with people. That was right, and it still is. I am a specialist. I do something that very few other people can. That is why I have a position at Shell. If you have certain strengths, you probably have weaknesses too. Perhaps in the case of autism, we have only mentioned the negative aspects and we need to look hard for the positive aspects that exist as well."

### **Autism embassies**

"I am involved with autism embassies. The VAB has recently hosted seventeen organisations, two ministries, one regional police force, and a number of companies for a conference. Seventeen people with autism and their HR manager wanted to investigate whether or not they could be more open about their autism in their organisation. If they want to take action on this, then we can train them so that more of their colleagues understand what works well, and what less so, and how to make the most of that knowledge. If people are open or work in a position and wish to take part with the backing of their organisation, they should get in touch."

### **Subconscious observation**

"When I show the Heider-Simmel Demonstration film on YouTube and ask people what they have seen, they come up with all kinds of answers, but the only thing they see are two moving triangles. Everything else is a product of their imaginations. I would describe the fact that people are unable to make pure observations as a shortcoming. Unfortunately, this applies to 99 percent of people, and they do not realise it. And, as it happens, we refer to the remaining one percent that do not observe subconsciously as limited. If 99 percent understand interactions subconsciously, then people can respond to each other without difficulty. The poor autie is not even aware that everyone else can do this. Meanwhile, 'everyone else' is not aware that that one person is not automatically able to do so."

## Loner

"Every time I change job - every four or five years - I need a period of acclimatisation of several months; how do I behave in this group? They are already at lunch - can I just join them? But when I go to lunch, the table may be full. So do I dare go and sit at a table by myself? Fifty years old, and you still find yourself asking questions like that. That is the being ill-at-ease that I will always have, I think. At my work, I have a note attached to my laptop that says, 'I can always ask other people'. I know it, yet I never do. I am not even remotely tempted. I have been a loner for fifty years. I have always done what I am really good at doing on my own. More than that - I have specialised to the point that other people have to come to me. That is a considerable limitation."

## Tricks

"Everything in this world has been designed. For me, it is sometimes difficult to accept that people get away with stupid mistakes. Thresholds that are set at different heights, for example. Emergency exit signs four metres above the ground, even though we know which direction smoke goes in. Half of the doors are heavy, and you never know which ones. It is too futile for words. I have had to train myself not to let it bother me. It takes me a great deal of effort, but I am still working, so clearly I am solving things. Since having a smartphone, things have improved on more fronts. For example, I often used to go to meetings unprepared - not so much unprepared regarding the subject, but on how people wanted to talk about it and discuss it. When I make an appointment now, I set aside time for it. I have learnt extra tricks."



**Connie van Uffelen**

---

This site uses functional and analytic cookies. These cookies are needed to let the site operate to its full potential. You can manage your preferences.

**I'M OKAY WITH THAT**

**OPTIONS**