



Temple *of* Wisdom

As more individuals are identified as having autism spectrum traits, bestselling author and speaker **Temple Grandin** says the meeting and event industry has roles perfect for them.

BY JASON HENSEL

PHOTO BY JEFF LOY



“A place like this would be really horrible if you had to show PowerPoint.”

Temple Grandin is pointing out the glass ceiling. She lounges on a lavish sofa in the Adolphus Hotel's tea room, a favorite spot for the well-to-do women of Dallas who regularly meet to gossip among the tropical plants and under the bright skylight.

“One time I spoke at a church that had a lot of glass. I walk in there and think, “There aren't going to be any slides.”

That attention to detail is what Grandin is known for.

Born in Boston in 1947, she didn't begin speaking until age 4. A doctor diagnosed her with brain damage because there wasn't a clear definition of autism at that time. Her mother worked hard at providing proper therapy and job experiences throughout her younger years.

“When I was 13, my mother set me up working for a local seamstress,” she says. “When I was 15, I was cleaning horse stalls. Even in the best job there is going to be some drudgery that's not very fun. When I was in college, I worked in some internships. I'm seeing these awkward, geeky kids graduate from college and they never learn how to work. When you're 12 or 13, how about walk a couple of dogs for the neighbors? Do it every day, rain or shine. How about work at the farmers' market every weekend? Mow lawns or clean swimming pools or fix computers. We need to get started on this before age 16.”

Grandin received a Ph.D. in Animal Science from the University of Illinois in 1989 and currently teaches courses at Colorado State University on livestock behavior and facility design. She's also a livestock industry consultant, a tireless speaker and the world's most famous autistic person. That became evident in 2010 when HBO produced a biographic film about her. Named *Temple Grandin*, it stars Claire Danes, Julia Ormond and David Strathairn, and its many awards include seven Emmys, a Golden Globe, a Screen Actors Guild Award and a Peabody.

In its dramatization of her life, the movie shows how Grandin experiences the world, something she wrote about in her book, *Thinking in Pictures*.

“I translate both spoken and written words into full-color movies, complete with sound, which run like a VCR tape in my head,” she wrote. “When somebody speaks to me, his words are instantly translated into pictures. Language-based thinkers often find this phenomenon difficult to understand, but in my job as an equipment designer for the livestock industry, visual thinking is a tremendous advantage.”

The biggest advantage of thinking this way has to do with details.

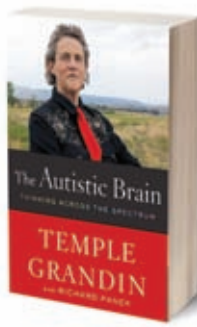
“The one common denominator of all autistic and Asperger thinking

is that details are associated into categories to form a concept," she wrote. "Details are assembled into concepts like putting a jigsaw puzzle together. The picture on the puzzle can be seen when only 20 percent of the puzzle is put together, forming a big picture."

Attention to detail and seeing the big picture is what makes an event a good event and this, she says, is where those with autism could find a place in the meeting and event industry (see Page 24). Too often, though, they are saddled with a label that scares employers. Grandin's goal nowadays is to educate employers and get autistic people hired.

"I see too many kids that would be great working in the meeting industry who aren't getting jobs. You need people to set up those complicated screens, all those lights and scaffolding and stuff, and the best people who do this are playing video games and on Social Security," she says, slapping at the sofa with her right hand. "They get the label and they become the label. The problem is the label is so broad. People think the kid is not capable. When the diagnostic labels change, they're going to call mild autism, which was Asperger's [syndrome], a social communication disorder. It's still the same thing—shy and introvert. It's not a precise diagnostic."

The current *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, published by the American Psychological Association, defines people with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) as having "communication deficits, such as responding inappropriately in conversations, misreading nonverbal interactions or having difficulty building friendships appropriate to their age. In addition, people with ASD may be overly dependent on routines, highly sensitive to changes in their environment or intensely focused on inappropriate items."



Editor's Pick

★★★★ 1/2

The Autistic Brain: Thinking Across the Spectrum by Temple Grandin and Richard Panek

Grandin and Panek inform readers about the latest science of autism and new ways to understand causes, diagnoses and treatments of the syndrome. Grandin's personal story is a thread throughout the book, which helps answer the question: How do we encourage more positive ways to think about autism?

ASD symptoms fall on a continuum from mild to severe, and people with ASD "must show symptoms from early childhood, even if those symptoms are not recognized until later."

In her latest book, *The Autistic Brain*, Grandin writes that the *DSM-5* is "diagnosis by committee."

"It's a bunch of doctors sitting around a conference table arguing about insurance codes," she writes, along with co-writer Richard Panek. "Thanks to label-locking thinking, we now have a cornucopia of diagnoses—and there simply aren't enough brain systems for all these names."

Grandin believes this kind of thinking is dangerous.

"For some people, a label can become the thing that defines them," she writes. "It can easily lead to what I call a handicapped mentality. When a person gets a diagnosis of Asperger's, for instance, he might start to think, 'What's the point?' or 'I'll never hold down a job.' His whole life starts to revolve around what he can't do instead of what he can do, or at least what he can try to improve."

And in Grandin's opinion, what people with autism can do is details, and once social skills are learned through working, they become prime job candidates, especially in the meeting and event industry.

"They're very, very good on detail," she says. "For example, you're shipping a lot of equipment for a convention. Different conventions have different needs. A person with autism has good attention to detail; they're good at making sure stuff gets sent to the right place."

And there are different kinds of minds on the autism spectrum that can work specific jobs.

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Planning Considerations for Autistic Attendees

Volume—avoid sudden noises or loud speakers.

Light—if you can control illumination, avoid fluorescents.

Interiors—high-contrasts, like stripes, bother some people with autism.

others who are more visual thinkers, like me, who would be good at setting a lot of stuff up,” she says. “And then you have the word minds and they’d be good at record keeping, to make sure all the equipment and stuff arrives at the convention.”

Grandin says if an employee with autism does commit a social faux pas or makes a mistake at work, which is bound to happen, don’t fire the person. Instead, give them directions on how to do something correctly.

“You have to be direct, and don’t do it in front of other people. You can’t hint,” she says. “You just have to tell them what’s expected. If they make mistakes, you just explain what they did wrong. With autism, you can’t be subtle.”

It can start with pulling an employee back into the office and making it very clear what was unacceptable.

“For example, if they’re standing too close to someone, you need to demonstrate the correct way,” she says. “If a guy is a slob, just pull him aside and say, ‘You can’t be a slob.’”

Grandin’s honesty and insight have helped raise awareness all over the world of what life is like for people with autism. Consider hiring someone on the spectrum for a job in our industry. Sure, there will be challenges, but the rewards are much greater. ■

Premier Placement

A collaborative industry effort placed people with autism spectrum disorders in roles throughout the meeting and event industry (see story on Page 24), to high praise based on the following testimonials.

“Overall a great experience. Gillian Stone has a fantastic personality, a great attitude to work and wants to do things well the first time. The experience reminded me of how important are those often forgotten one on ones with your junior team members.”

— **Teresa Chacon, HR manager, Grand Connaught Rooms**

“Some of the stereotypes of someone with autism, such as the inability to articulate or reticence to change, have definitely been disproven in Laurence Burton’s case as he has proven himself to be very adaptable and willing to try new things over the last few weeks. We have really enjoyed having him here.”

— **Kate Fletcher, general manager, Devonport House**

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