

Autism works: the future of corporate inclusion

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is twofold; 1) to provide an explanation of autism spectrum disorder, including characteristics, commonalities, and generalizations and 2) shed light upon employment practices various companies use in order to recruit and retain individuals with Autism. Autism is documented as one of the fastest-growing developmental disorders in the United States (autismspeaks.org.) Autism, or autism spectrum disorder, “refers to a range of conditions characterized by challenges with social skills, repetitive behaviors, speech and nonverbal communication, as well as by unique strengths and differences. The term spectrum reflects the wide variation in challenges and strengths possessed by each person with autism.” (autismspeaks.org.) People who are neurodiverse, a term often referred to when speaking of those on the autism spectrum, are often technologically inclined, detail-oriented, have strong analytical skills, have strong mathematical skills, pattern recognition, and information processing, skills businesses most urgently need in the current landscape of companies in the United States.

Keywords: autism, autism spectrum disorder, neurodiverse, inclusion, hiring practices

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INTRODUCTION

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) refers to a group of cognitive disabilities usually characterized by significant developmental, social and communication delays as well as behavioral challenges. ASD, once a singular diagnosis, now encompasses autism, Asperger's Syndrome (AS) and Pervasive Developmental Disorder- Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS). The American Psychiatric Association (2013) revised the criteria necessary for an autism diagnosis to allow for the inclusion of ASD and PDD-NOS and stipulates that individuals need to meet the following criteria to receive the diagnosis: "(1) Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history; (2) Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as manifested by at least two of the following, currently or by history; (3) Symptoms must be present in the early developmental period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked by learned strategies in later life); (4) Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning; (5) These disturbances are not better explained by intellectual disability (intellectual developmental disorder) or global developmental delay. Intellectual disability and autism spectrum disorder frequently co-occur; to make comorbid diagnoses of autism spectrum disorder and intellectual disability, social communication should be below that expected for general developmental level" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Commonalities and generalizations often lead society to assume all individuals on the spectrum behave in much the same ways. Autism has unique and varying presentations that range from barely noticeable to very severe. Taking this into account, there are some characteristics seen in a majority of those diagnosed. According to the National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke (2015), such common characteristics may include: (1) Delayed communication development. The utilization of alternative communication methods such as sign language, Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS), text-to-voice and picture boards are often used to aid in communication while language develops; (2) The inability to interpret social cues and conform to social norms. Many on the spectrum have difficulty in social situations due to an inability to read verbal and non-verbal cues and apply, especially if these norms seem counter-intuitive; (3) Limited eye contact. The ability to make and maintain eye contact is often perceived as indifference when the reality is eye contact is an important precept of non-verbal communication.

Since communication is an area of delay for these individuals, eye contact is characteristically absent for many of these individuals; (4) Repetitive or compulsive behaviors. Many engage in repetitive behaviors fueled by an underlying compulsion, a need to control their immediate environment or the desire to calm and decompress. Often referred to as stimulating or stimming behaviors, these behaviors may include things like hand flapping, verbal ticks, finger movements, lining up of items and verbal scripting; (5) Rigidity. Autistic individuals often have difficulty with changes to routine or their environment. The need for continuity and consistency is often paramount in achieving success; (6) Sensory processing issues. Sensitivity to sound, light and unfamiliar environments can cause autistic individuals to become upset and unable to perform routine tasks. This can be problematic in environments where noise is constant and unavoidable; (7) Difficulty with standardized testing methods. Many individuals on the spectrum require nonverbal cues and prompts to properly answer a question or complete a task for the first time. Strategies such as hand over hand, visual presentation and advance behavioral analysis

techniques are often more effective but not supported in standardized testing. This can lead to misinformation in regards to these individuals' intelligence and capabilities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM

According to the Center for Disease Control (2017), one in sixty-eight children are diagnosed Autism Spectrum Disorder, representing about 1% of the total world population and making autistic individuals the fastest growing disabled population in the world. Autism has been observed across all population subsets regardless of race, ethnicity and socio-economic status and is 4-5 times more likely to be diagnosed in male children as opposed to female children (CDC, 2017). The rapid increase in diagnosed cases can be explained by increases in awareness among both the medical and non-medical communities. Developmental screenings and questionnaires, availability of information and access to services, have contributed to a drastic increase in early detection and diagnosis (Wright, 2017). There are those that argue over-diagnosis has contributed to the steep incline in diagnoses cases, and this may very well be the case, but many pediatricians, evaluators and psychiatrists are erring on the side of caution and placing the diagnosis. Individuals can only receive the services once the diagnosis has been made so those in the community would rather place the diagnosis over-cautiously and allow the child to receive the necessary help then miss meeting a child's needs and causing irreparable harm. Research has proven early detection and intervention can be essential to maximizing a child's potential for long-term progress and even the possibility of progressing to the point of clinical neurotypicality (Koegel, Koegel, Ashbaugh & Bradshaw, 2014; Lovaas, 1987; McEachlin, Smith & Lovaas, 1993).

The public education system is spending time and resources to prepare children and adults on the spectrum for life after high school. Adults age out of the school system at age 22 and are often placed in sheltered workshops, minimum wage jobs or cooperative and volunteer positions. Years are spent preparing these students for the challenges facing them after school and what adjustments will be needed in order to obtain and maintain a job. Because autism has differing levels of cognitive impairment and differing levels of severity in social and behavioral challenges, employment is not always a realistic option. However, in many cases, autistic adults are not only capable of holding down meaningful employment, they can contribute positively to their work environments.

With statistics like those of newly diagnosed cases of Autism Spectrum Disorder, one has to wonder what full impact this population will have as autistic adults age out of the school system and enter into the work force. The reality facing corporations is one in which a very large number of potential employees entering the work force will be diagnosed somewhere on the autism spectrum. The school system is working to prepare these individuals for the leap to employment but we are failing to address this transition from the corporate side. The fear is that if companies don't prepare now, autistic individuals will face a corporate climate completely unprepared for their unique gifts and talents and the opportunity loss to the employment environment could be drastic.

As it currently stands, employment may prove to be challenging for individuals on the spectrum. According to Hendricks (2010), research overwhelmingly shows dismal outcomes for the demographic. Many of these individuals are unemployed, and for those that attain employment, many are underemployed. In the first global study focused on employment of adults with ASD, Cone (2018) states that more than two-thirds of adults diagnosed with ASD are

either unemployed or underemployed. Those on the spectrum tend to find many more obstacles in gaining, and retaining employment. With these results, the researchers aim is to help spur improved job opportunities for individuals on the spectrum. Hendricks (2010) reviewed evidence based research related to employment for individuals on the spectrum and also aimed to identify strategies for success in gaining employment. Through this endeavor, the following strategies emerged as those that could be helpful when hiring an individual with ASD: 1. appropriate job match and placement, 2. supportive supervisors and co-workers, 3. on-the-job training, 4. workplace modifications, and long-term support.

ADVANTAGES OF HIRING INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM

Organizations need to assess and ultimately implement strategies to address the adjustments that will need to be made in the hiring process, in performance assessment, in the physical environment as well as in how managers and employees interact and communicate. Misconceptions and misinformation often lead to fear and anxiety and cause many companies to avoid what they do not understand. The inherent problem is that eventually, these companies will not be able to ignore these trends and will need to find ways to integrate autistic adults into their work forces. The hope would be that effective integration strategies and solid employee training programs will become a standard part of corporate protocol and allow autistic individuals to become an important and productive member of our workforce.

Adults on the autism spectrum are often willing and well-suited for a variety of positions matched to their specific interests and strengths and provide beneficial opportunities for companies both societally and economically (Jacob, Scott, Falkmer & Falkmer, 2015). Employment opportunities such as data entry, computer programming, accounting, engineering and library science often prove to be a natural fit for autistic individuals as they share the need for order, repetition and definitive goal setting (Grandin, 1999). Consistency, predictability and repetitiveness are qualities that play to the strengths of these individuals as they require constant focus and precision.

Among the benefits autistic adults can bring to the workplace are: (1) a willingness to complete routine, repetitive and tedious tasks. Once direction is given and demonstrated, these employees can work for extended periods completing the same task over again. They find comfort in consistency and will often work well without direct supervision when factors are kept constant; (2) Focus and attention to detail. There is a natural inclination to complete tasks as shown and not to deviate from the procedures set forth. This is valuable when a task requires exactness each time and relies on an individual's ability to replicate their actions consistently; (3) Honesty and reliability. Most autistic individuals do not possess the awareness necessary for deceptive behavior. Answers are direct and honest. Work ethic is steady and constant and, with assistance, most will attend work without issue; (4) Inclusiveness and genuineness. Autistic individuals often serve as an example of being included and including others. There is a realness to their interactions and intentions that provides a great example for peers and supervisors; and (5) Natural charisma. They tend to draw people to them with their personality and honesty. Autistic adults are often credited with creating a team culture and spirit not seen in offices where inclusivity is under-utilized.

Promoting meaningful inclusivity is essential to embracing the coming wave of autistic adults into the work force. Preparing staff and management for the coming influx will be key to creating dynamic and successful businesses focused on utilizing the talents of everyone in the

community and committed to recognizing the talents of those with all abilities. Creating new social norms and breaking stigmas and stereotypes will ultimately define the corporate environment and culture moving forward. As a society, we are beginning to see the value in true diversity and in the power of capturing the essence of the human spirit and what it offers in every unique situation.

For those with Autism, finding employment may be challenge. It is estimated that between 80 to 90 percent of adults with Autism are either unemployed or underemployed. Moreover, those that are employed find themselves working part-time in low paying jobs, making about \$8.00 an hour. Wright (2016) states that the reason for these dismal statistics isn't due to the lack of ability to perform the jobs but rather the challenges people on the spectrum may face with communication and social interactions. These are two key skills in the business environment so it becomes important to assess what can be done to prepare those on the spectrum to be successful in the business environment.

Each person in the workforce brings unique skills, knowledge, and characteristics, people on the spectrum are no different. However, those on the spectrum will most likely have unique characteristics that employers should be aware. Knowing that social interactions and communication barriers could be two of those characteristics, employers must do what they can to provide a work environment that allows those on the spectrum to flourish. In order to reduce the employment-related challenges facing those on the spectrum, we first consider what companies are currently doing in order to recruit and retain individuals with Autism. Douglas & Nadel (2015) state that as companies realize the magnitude of untapped talent, they are beginning to utilize the specialized skills that people on the spectrum bring in order to leverage a competitive advantage for their companies. SAP, the global software provider, is one such company.

BEST PRACTICES IN HIRING INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM

SAP launched its Autism at Work program in May 2013. The program is aimed at recruiting and hiring adults on the spectrum. According to Florentine (2015) the program has been a success and SAP is currently strategizing to expand the program. The program addresses challenges those with Autism face, those challenges are the lack of social skills and communication abilities. Florentine (2015) states that due to the communication and social barriers, people on the spectrum tend not to interview well. SAP's program addresses this issue by conducting month-long screening and interview processes which involve a more in-depth analysis of the person. This could include having candidates use a detailed set of directions to build robots from LEGOs, and then progress from there into whatever form the candidate may prefer. Since each person is unique, there's not one set right way to interview. One person may prefer long walks while talking, and someone else may prefer small groups while talking. SAP is giving a customized approach to finding a suitable hire. This style corroborates with Lorenz, Frishchling, Cuadros, & Heinitz (2016) findings where they also propose a customized approach to successfully employing those on the spectrum. They state that employment should in fact be based upon individual needs resources.

SAP has also partnered with Danish firm Specialisterne, which is a company that provides programs for talent and career development for individuals with Autism. According to the organization's website, (<http://usa.specialisterne.com/about-specialisterne/>) their Mission is

to “educate stakeholders in talent and career development for autistic people through innovation, collaboration, and knowledge sharing.” They are known as a pioneer in leading the way for innovative companies such as HPE, SAP, and Microsoft to benefit from including individuals on the spectrum in competitive jobs. Specialisterne has created momentum for companies that show interest in hiring those on the spectrum. They believe their impact to be significant, specifically stating that individuals with Autism will have career choices and become independent, their families will worry less about the future of their Autistic loved one, employers will be able to fill vacant jobs and grow their business, and society will make better use of talent in order to expand the labor market. The Vision Statement of Specialisterne is “A world where people are given equal opportunities in the labor market.”

SAP has also introduced autism awareness and sensitivity training for the neurotypical employees. This is meant to aid in the integration and onboarding of the autistic employees. There are even mentor volunteers that work one-on-one with employees on the spectrum in order to help address any issues that may arise during the day-to-day operations.

Lastly, SAP doesn't pigeonhole candidates on the spectrum. Florentine (2015) states that SAP doesn't assume individuals with Autism will only be successful in certain positions. They realize that everyone has different interests and unique talents and place individuals according to strengths they possess. Douglas (2015) states that any company can start a program similar to SAP, these programs and services aren't exclusive to global companies, they can be adapted for smaller organizations as well.

EY, formerly Ernst & Young, has initiated initiatives in order to provide opportunities for individuals on the spectrum to find meaningful work. Zillman (2016) states that EY has recently begun to seek out and recruit employees with Autism specifically for accounting positions. In addition to helping the individuals find work, these programs help the company address real business needs. According to Zillman (2016) individuals with high-functioning Autism often possess strong technical and mathematical abilities. In addition, they can be detail-oriented and do well with pattern recognition. All of these characteristics help someone succeed in a job where the main duties include finding ways to automate tasks and sifting through log data from clients.

In 2015, Microsoft piloted a program which focused on hiring individuals with Autism and improve the company's neurodiversity. According to Microsoft's website (www.microsoft.com) the company believes that diversity enriches performance and products, communities, and lives of their employees. It is stated that they believe there is a lot of untapped potential in the marketplace; roles that would help future employees find success in the workplace. The website also states that while any role at Microsoft is a potential option for the Autism Hiring Program, they have found most often the best fits are for positions of Software Engineer, Service Engineer, Build Engineer, Lab Engineer, Data Analyst, or Data Scientist.

Nickelsburg (2016) cited a quote by Mary Ellen Smith, Microsoft's VP of Worldwide Operations, where she said that Microsoft is stronger when they expand opportunity and foster a diverse environment that will be able to represent their customers. She believes that people with Autism possess strengths needed at Microsoft, realizing that each individual is unique, with abilities ranging from the ability to retain information think at a level of detail and depth, and exceling in math or code.

Microsoft assigns each individual in the program a mentor, providing support on different levels. In addition, managers undergo training so they will be sensitive to the particular challenges individuals on the spectrum face in order to understand behavior. At the date of

Nickelsburg's article (2016) all those hired through the program have performed at or above expectations, and no one had left the company.

Erbentraut (2015) states that Walgreens is another corporate leader in hiring those on the spectrum. The company piloted a program in its distribution center in Anderson, South Carolina. The program had very strong results. In fact, the facility turned out to be the company's most productive. This led to the company expanding the model into other distribution centers. Erbentraut (2015) goes on to state that Walgreens has even built a mock store in Evanston, Illinois. This store is part of a workplace training program for people on the spectrum. This is a program established in partnership with The Have Dreams Academy.

Hewlett Packard Enterprises (HPE) spent a year developing its Dandelion program. This program was created to provide job opportunities to people with Autism. Wright (2016) states the HPE also uses Autism consultants, employees that have completed autism awareness and management training. The consultants help with the onboarding process and continue to work with the Autistic employees in order to create development plans. These plans are individualized and on tend to focus on life and executive-function skills. HPE strives to promote job and career movement in order to build resilience and retention among the Autistic workforce.

In addition to what employers are doing to recruit and retain those on the spectrum, we consider what successfully employed individuals with Autism have done to overcome barriers and find successful employment. In their study, Lorenz, Frischling, Cuadros, & Heinitz (2016) identified solutions that individuals with Autism utilized in order to succeed entering the job market. They focused on positive psychology, which put emphasis on particular strengths instead of weaknesses, in order to identify the solutions that led to overcoming the barriers for employment. In regard to solutions, they found that individuals working in non-autism specific workplaces cited external help from the work environment as the most frequently used approach to solving problems. For those working in autism-specific environments, the most frequently cited solutions were self-solutions, communication, and acceptance. Based upon their findings, Lorenz, Frischling, Cuadros, & Heinitz (2016) suggest providing a customized approach to successfully employing individuals on the spectrum, stating that employment should be based upon their needs and resources. They further propose that findings should encourage individuals on the spectrum, employers, and support workers to focus upon strengths and solutions, not deficits. They believe the positive psychology approach could not only help aid in problem solving but also enhance self-efficacy for those individuals on the spectrum.

CONCLUSION

For companies interested in developing programs that focus on recruitment and retention of individuals on the spectrum, there are various resources available. Autism Speaks, an organization with a Mission to promote solutions for the needs of individuals with Autism and their families, provides various employment related resources. (www.autismspeaks.org) Autism Speaks provides guidelines that help employers recruit, hire and support those on the spectrum. This guide includes things like being wary of online application tracking systems, as this type of system may screen out individuals with a cognitive disability, utilizing certain websites to post jobs that may be fit for those on the spectrum.

Companies will find various resources focusing on hiring practices. In order to effectively select individuals on the spectrum, companies may consider using behaviorally based interviewing, being aware that adults on the spectrum may have no prior work experience,

consider giving candidates job previews, utilize consultants to assess what jobs may be suitable for those on the spectrum, educate the current workforce in regard to what they can expect when working with someone on the spectrum, utilize trained mentors to help with onboarding and acclimation, and consider using jobs coaches in order to help employees know exactly what is expected in his or her specific role. (www.autismspeaks.org)

There are appropriate workplaces and spaces for individuals on the spectrum. There are benefits to hiring individuals on the spectrum, benefits that could help give the company a competitive advantage. In a study conducted by Scott et al. (2017), the researchers examined the benefits and costs of hiring individuals with ASD, from an employer perspective. The findings of this study suggest that hiring an individual on the spectrum will provide benefits to the organization without incurring additional costs.

It would be advantageous for hiring managers to invest time in thinking about how company policies, structures, and spaces could be designed for inclusivity. It would also be advantageous for hiring managers to provide an opportunity for those on the spectrum to contribute skills and abilities that will help the company succeed in the future. In a study conducted by Harmuth et al (2018), seven databases and 161 articles were reviewed for information regarding the barriers and facilitators to employment for individuals with ASD. Through this scoping review it was found that employers should focus attention on providing a customized work environment with long-term supports and accommodations. Employers should think about developing workplaces that will not only inform, but encourage an environment that is supportive for those with ASD. In summary, now is the time to think about Autism at work.

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