

Adults with Autism in the Workforce

Tom Murphy, Director of Corporate Development, Autism Speaks

Autism Spectrum Disorder, commonly known as autism, is one of the most misunderstood and challenging developmental disorders of the modern era. It is a group of complex disorders of brain development characterized by social challenges, communication difficulties and repetitive behaviors.

Now affecting an estimated 3 million Americans and one in 68 children, according to the CDC, autism has become the most expensive developmental disorder in the US, with an estimated societal cost of \$137 billion and rising.

Autism is believed to be caused by a combination of environmental and genetic factors – and scientists are just beginning to understand how it affects the brain and body. Many people with autism may also have other conditions such as sleep disorders, gastrointestinal problems, epilepsy and anxiety disorders.

But autism is a truly wide spectrum: an estimated 25-30% of people on the spectrum are non-verbal and there are many individuals on the spectrum who exhibit (as we shall see below) extraordinary characteristics and skills that are of significant value to employers and society in general. There is a well-known saying in the autism community that captures the acute individuality of autism spectrum disorder: “If you know one person with autism, you know one person with autism.”

Autism presents huge challenges and opportunities for children and adults at all stages of life. But one area of increasing concern and focus is the transition of teens on the autism spectrum to adulthood. In the next decade, 500,000 children with autism will transition to adulthood. For individuals with autism and their families, this transition is particularly difficult because federally mandated educational supports stop when a child turns 21 (in most states).

Adults and families already grappling with autism’s costs (which average \$60,000 annually to manage one individual’s needs) are largely left on their own to find postsecondary education, housing, community living, healthcare and

employment opportunities. A major study, funded in part by Autism Speaks, found that young adults with autism between the ages of 19 and 23 are less likely than any other disability group to be enrolled in higher education. The unemployment rate of adults with autism is alarmingly high at approximately 85-90% – and those with jobs are traditionally employed below their capabilities. Even for highly qualified candidates, interviewing is particularly challenging and social cues and norms in the workplace – both written and unwritten – are vexing for many adults with autism.

But a closer look at the issue – and recent success stories – provides a great deal of optimism and opportunity for employers and candidates alike. AutonomyWorks (www.autonomy-works.com), based in suburban Chicago, is one company taking on this task. The company has identified exceptional skills of many people with autism – attention to detail, affinity for repetition and comfort with computers, among others. The company leverages these skills to outsource back-office work from more than a dozen companies. Typical work includes reporting, testing and system operations.

For Centro, a digital technology and marketing company, AutonomyWorks tests and validates more than 1,000 advertising placements per month. By hiring AutonomyWorks, Centro liberated its team from one of their most tedious and error-prone tasks, while reducing costs by 20%.

AutonomyWorks employs 15 adults with autism working from the company’s dedicated facility. The company has built a work environment and supporting tools that enable people with autism to work at peak productivity. Founder and CEO Dave Friedman has seen the team’s abilities firsthand. “We see the same results time and time again. Our associates with autism are able to complete work faster and at a higher quality than other teams.”

One small business owner in New York, who has had significant experience hiring and mentoring adults with autism, added: “Their attention to detail is so remarkable and the work ethic is unbelievable.”

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Similar experiences have been reported by Freddie Mac, software giant SAP, Zenith, OptiMedia and Walgreen’s, a pioneer in hiring persons with disabilities. Some adults with autism have extraordinary ability to focus, see patterns others don’t and put those skills to good use.

Michael Burry, profiled on 60 Minutes and in Michael Lewis’ book “The Big Short” was one of only a few investors who saw the subprime mortgage crisis coming and profited wildly from it. He realized that “complex modern financial markets were as good as designed to reward a person with Asperger’s (an outdated diagnosis referring to a higher functioning form of autism) who took an interest in them.”

Adults with autism are already present and prevalent in the modern workplace. Many don’t self-identify for fear of being stigmatized or discriminated against. But in certain industries and companies, the autism community is being embraced and valued. Recently, Google’s head of Public Policy, Susan Molinari, tweeted that she estimated “1 in 5 Googlers is on the autism spectrum.” Companies like Google, SAP and a growing number of others recognize that their colleagues with autism are committed and consistent, not interested in office gossip, have fewer absences, lower turnover rates and represent true “out of the box” thinking. More and more, pioneers and innovators in this arena have found that hiring adults with autism turns a social benefit into business opportunities, leading to lower costs, tremendous goodwill and press attention, higher revenues and increased profits.

Of course, savvy marketers, human resources personnel and business development professionals already recognize that

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Adults with Autism, Continued

capitalizing on the ROI of employing people with disabilities reflects the \$3 trillion market globally that is controlled by persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities and their families, friends and associates represent a \$220 billion dollar market in the US alone. They, like other market segments, purchase products and services from companies that best meet their needs - and a large number of Americans also say they prefer to patronize businesses that hire people with disabilities. Businesses across the United States have also begun to realize that hiring talented candidates with disabilities including autism is not only the

right thing to do; it makes good business sense while demonstrating high returns on investment and aiding in federal contractors' compliance with Section 503 of the U.S. Department of Labor's Rehabilitation Act.

What's needed to turn this trickle of good news into a movement that truly leverages the talents and unique skills of adults with autism? For starters, employers should understand that adults on the autism spectrum do thrive and benefit from some *natural* supports - strategies that coworkers and managers use on a regular basis with all of their colleagues in the workplace,

regardless of whether or not they have a disability. These include, but are not limited to:

- Technology - smartphones, iPod Touch, tablets
- Job coaches and mentors
- Wait time (usually a simple moment of silence will help greatly)
- Written instructions
- Visual supports

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ERS Press

A Publication of
Employee Resource Systems, Inc.
An Employee Assistance Program

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And colleagues might ask, "How should I treat individuals with autism?" Experts answer, "Like everyone else," but accompanied by some very common sense and basic guidelines.

- Talk less; be direct and concise
- Give wait time (silence is okay)
- Keep it concrete and straightforward
- Try to avoid using sarcasm or abstract phrases (slang)
- When giving a direction, provide extra cues (pointing, modeling the task)
- Be warm and welcoming, but not over-the-top

Tom Murphy is the Director of Corporate Development at Autism Speaks and an advocate for employment of adults on the autism spectrum. During his career with nonprofits and corporations, he has spearheaded fundraising programs netting tens of millions of dollars on behalf of infants, the elderly, breast cancer research, homeless teens and military families.

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