

Autism seen as asset, not liability, in some jobs

A new movement helps hone unique traits of disorder into valuable skills

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Ron Brix's longtime job as a computer systems developer for Wrigley, the gum and candy maker, required intense attention to detail, single-minded focus and a willingness to work on something repetitively until perfect.

The secret he credits to his success? Autism.

Brix, age 54, was diagnosed in 2001 with Asperger Syndrome, a form of autism often marked by the exact traits that help make him an ideal employee.

"My career would not have existed at all without the autism," says Brix.

The developmental condition, which strikes about 1 in 150 U.S. children, is considered a "spectrum disorder" because it affects people in many different ways to varying degrees, from mild social troubles to a severe inability to communicate.

It's often seen as a heartbreaking diagnosis, but now some revolutionary companies see autism as something else: a resource.

A quiet movement is growing around the globe to help transform the unique attributes of high-functioning autistic adults into sought-after job skills.

In Denmark, the company Specialisterne (the name means "the specialists"), trains people with autism as specially skilled employees who are sent out as hourly consultants to companies to do data

entry, assembly work and other jobs that many workers would find tedious and repetitive. Founded in 2004 by businessman Thorkil Sonne, the father of an autistic son, the company has 50 employees, 75 percent of whom are autistic.

In the United States, the non-profit Chicago company [Aspiritech](#) recently launched a pilot program to train high-functioning autistics as testers for software development companies. Their first client is mFluent, an iPhone application company near Chicago.

Aspiritech — whose board includes Brix, now retired from Wrigley, and the actor Ed Asner, whose son Charles is autistic — claims those who are autistic have a talent for spotting imperfections, and thrive on predictable, monotonous work.

Brix says his ability to focus on something to the exclusion of everything else gives him an advantage. And Specialisterne says tests show their employees can be up to eight times more accurate at tasks like manual data entry than workers without autism.

"The stuff we do is boring for [others], like going through a program looking at every detail, testing the same function over and over again in different situations, but it doesn't disturb those of us with autism," says Thomas Jacobsen, an autistic employee at Specialisterne. "That's our strength."

Still, software testing isn't simply a repetitive exercise, notes Dan Shiovitz of Marchex, a software company in Seattle that specializes in online search and advertising. While traits of "detail focus, willingness to repeat tasks and technical aptitude are ones we look for in testers, testing has a lot of creative work," he notes. Testers need to be able to figure out possible solutions to problems and be agile enough to change plans at the last minute or deal with sudden new requirements.

These were challenges to Brix in his job programming machines that mix ingredients and wrap gum. A large part of his job involved the human factor, such as designing the interactive screens that operators use to run the machinery. Brix also did on-site set-up, which meant travelling to Wrigley's international locations, meeting new people and functioning in new cultures.

At Wrigley, Brix's longtime colleague Rod Onusaitis helped him navigate his social interactions.

"We got along well," says Onusaitis, an engineer. "I knew what his problems were and I was able to guide him in the right direction to complete his tasks. He was very detailed oriented and a good programmer, but sometimes overlooked the big picture."

Next generation of autistic adults

Each year, over 26,000 children born in the U.S. will eventually be diagnosed with autism, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. An estimated half-million people under the age

of 21 are autistic, and Specialisterne estimates that 85 percent of them can expect to be unemployed or underemployed.

Aspiritech founder Brenda Weitzberg has a 30-year-old autistic son who, in spite of having a college degree, has been limited by his social skills to jobs like collecting carts for a grocery store.

"I am a friendly guy, and my co-workers like me," says Oran Weitzberg, "however, I have limited social skills and autism does make finding and keeping a job difficult. I have trouble interpreting nonverbal signals from others, and I had to learn to converse in order to be a good co-worker."

He says his retail work at Target, Trader Joe's and AMC Theatres has helped him learn to interact with others.

Both Brenda and Oran Weitzberg say he struggles with poor organizational skills. "He needs an executive secretary," says Brenda Weitzberg. "But I know a lot of men like that." She says seeing her son's struggles inspired her to try to "address the explosion of children with autism who are becoming adults."

Brix also admits to difficulty in multi-tasking and organizing, in addition to his poor social skills. "I tend to be distant and aloof," he says. "I do not do a good job at reading facial expressions, and I do like my solitude."

As the numbers of those with autism are on the rise, so is an understanding of the disorder, both in society and in the workplace. Anthropologist Dawn Prince, of Bellingham, Wash., has written books about using her Asperger syndrome as a prism for her work on gorillas. She applies her obsession for learning to understanding their social interactions.

Animal behavior expert Temple Grandin, who is autistic, says her intense attention to detail was an asset in designing effective cattle containment systems that are now widely used. Grandin, who will be portrayed by Claire Danes in an HBO biopic scheduled to air in early 2010, advocates for employing autistics.

"Society loses out if individuals with autism spectrum disorders are not involved in the world of work, or make other kinds of contributions to society," she wrote in her book "Developing Talents."

Unique challenges

Brenda Weitzberg is realistic about the challenges, though. Aspiritech is currently running on donations and volunteers, and is seeking grants, investors and more company contracts. A pilot program trained three software testers, including Oran Weitzberg, who is now teaching others. Aspiritech is now interviewing candidates for the next training round.

At Specialisterne, the company in Denmark that trains and employs people with autism, founder Sonne says, "I think there's a huge opportunity for people who want to run businesses based on freeing the resources of people with autism."

To start Specialisterne, Sonne quit his job in information technology and communications and took out a second mortgage on the family home. Last year, the company made a small profit. Their clients include the toy company LEGO and Microsoft. (Msnbc.com is a joint venture of Microsoft and NBC.)

Potential employees go through months of screening and training before they are sent as hourly consultants to clients who must understand that the specialists will work only part-time, and they cannot work in a chaotic environment with more than a few other people in the room. In return, Specialisterne assumes much more responsibility for their employees than most companies, with learning experts and social workers on staff.

Robert Austin, a professor at Copenhagen Business School, wrote about Specialisterne for the Harvard Business School and says, "there's no reason this couldn't work in the United States." He says that redefining conditions like autism as differences, rather than disabilities, is important for a developed economy.

"Innovation is where it's at," he says, "and you can't innovate without variation." Austin says we need to recognize special abilities in people, realize that these may come with challenges to working in a traditional workplace, and find a way to minimize disabilities and take advantage of differences.

Austin, Sonne and Weitzberg all say that if we can figure this out, we can activate and use a part of our population that we've been ignoring.

"My understanding of autism is a person has both great gifts and deficits," says Brix. "My whole career was based on skills that came as a result of, not despite, my autism."

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