

For Some Jobs, Asperger's Syndrome Can Be An Asset

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Heard on Morning Edition

February 11, 2010 - RENEE MONTAGNE, host:

We're talking a lot about unemployment these days, and here's one striking figure: According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, fewer than 20 percent of the disabled people in the country have work - which gets us to a suburb outside of Chicago that's helping people with a form of autism.

Here's Chicago Public Radio's Adriene Hill.

ADRIENE HILL: Brian Tozzo is making sure programs like Yahoo Messenger and AOL interact properly with a cell phone.

Mr. BRIAN TOZZO: Right now I'm just sending what's called a group(ph) message, so...

HILL: He types a message into his phone, pushes send, and...

Mr. TOZZO: There it is - Hello, how are you? on the PC and on the screen you could see the same message, Hello, how are you? So it passes. Right?

HILL: Tozzo marks it down as a success in a spreadsheet that has hundreds, even thousands of repetitive tests.

At a different desk, Alan Sun is training with a similar list.

Mr. ALAN SUN: It definitely helps utilize my computer skills and lets me use them to help others. So, at least I'm seeing how my computer skills can be potentially useful to society.

Ms. BRENDA WEITZBERG (Founder, Aspiritech): Employment's so much more than a paycheck. It is structure to the day. It is sense of self-worth - value.

HILL: Brenda Weitzberg is the founder of Aspiritech, a non-profit with a mission of training and employing adults with Asperger's and high-functioning autism. She started the business because she felt frustrated with the lack of job resources for her 30-year-old son.

She says software testing is the perfect fit for people like him, with autism spectrum disorder.

Ms. WEITZBERG: They're very focused on detail, able to do highly repetitive work, able to spot imperfections.

HILL: Aspiritech is relatively new, started with \$25,000 in private donations. So far, it's trained eight testers. It's just signed its first contract for work that will start later this year.

Weitzberg's inspiration is a six-year-old Danish company called Specialisterne.

Mr. THORKIL SONNE (Founder, Specialisterne): ...that actually sees autism - the autism characteristics - as a potential competitive advantage.

HILL: Thorkil Sonne is the founder of Specialisterne. The company currently has three dozen consultants with autism spectrum disorder doing software testing and data entry. He came up with the idea after his own son was diagnosed with autism.

Do you feel like the outlook for your son is brighter than it was six years ago?

Mr. SONNE: Oh yes, much more. I think that there's a much more positive attitude and openness in the business sector in Denmark.

HILL: Sonne's hoping to spread the model worldwide.

Copenhagen Business School professor Robert Austin has studied Specialisterne's business.

Professor ROBERT AUSTIN (Copenhagen Business School): It does something that I think a lot of other models that hope to help people don't do. It aligns the interests of the people being helped with the interest of a business.

HILL: Austin says it's a hopeful model and that he'd like to see work.

It's one that doesn't view difference as disadvantage.

For NPR News, I'm Adriene Hill in Chicago.

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