Talented Project Leader Multitasks

"My boss calls me 'Eagle Eye' because I catch all the little details," said Louis Bouchard, 36, a project director for Equation Research, a 10-year-old online marketing research company of 17 full-time employees and several contractors who work from home, anywhere in the world.

Tethered by phone and computer, Bouchard, who happens to have autism, and his colleagues, operate on Eastern Standard Time, since most of the firm's clients are on the east coast. As a group, they meet only for a January "Summit," an intense company meeting with personnel reviews, seminars (what the company calls knowledge transfers) and celebrations over four days. Although needing to decompress after each Summit, this arrangement suits Bouchard just fine.

Bouchard's office, a desk, computer and telephone, is in his living room and one clock is always set to Eastern Time. Preferring uninterrupted time to solve the most difficult logistical programming challenges, he is quite satisfied to work in the "back-end" of the company and let others take care of the customers. Most of his work involves six or seven co-workers but in one week he will interact with one or two at a time as a specific project is addressed. At any one time on average he is dealing with two or three projects but in busy times, the number could build to four or five.

"Louis is a very, very important member of our team," said Elizabeth Kwiat of Equation Research, Bouchard's supervisor. "When he takes a day off, I need to make other arrangements so I know I am covered." Kwiat first knew of his work when the company's consultant contracted with Bouchard for additional programming help. Over the years the sub-contractor showed off his strengths in understanding computer programming as he quickly solved problems that had always stumped others. In 2006, when his two jobs, part-time consultant and part-time bus driver, were becoming unworkable, he mentioned to his contractor link to Equation Research that he was

"looking for a full-time job and I was giving them first dibs." Bouchard describes it as a three-year job interview.

Equation Research builds online surveys for major companies to gather quantitative feedback from potential customers regarding their product advertising. The survey computer platform is the key tool for this market research. Bouchard's role is to pull together the survey questions, related artwork, and the sequence of how the questions are offered. He programs it into the proprietary, second party platform. "What I do is apply the software engineering processes that I have learned." When all the elements are stitched in place to the platform, the survey is ready to present online.

He admits that his first years were much easier, but certainly remembers when he had to quickly teach himself HTML, or HyperText Markup Language, for an urgent project. Now he is doing more Photoshop adjustments to artwork and getting into the 'hard stuff." The work is constantly changing as clients, projects and the services needed from co-workers vary. Bouchard is now in the process of training others to take on some of his more routine and repetitive tasks. He is the main architect for a survey platform that allows the company to customize survey structures to perfectly fit its customers and the distributed structure. It is with this focused, uninterrupted, problem solving work that Bouchard is most productive.

Mike Travis founded this company in Colorado and assembled the best and the brightest, regardless of their physical location. Instead of dress codes and daily interactions to create structure and guidelines, he prescribed specific expectations of how employees would carry on their work lives. Kwiat presents these guides in shorthand as A2R2, or Approachable and Available, Responsive and Reliable, and is quick to note that a coming update to the equation is A3R2 as Anticipate is added to the mix. Kwiat summarizes this as a company attitude where the glass is half full, not half empty.

At age three, doctors in Buffalo, New York diagnosed Bouchard as having autism and suggested to his mother that he be institutionalized. She refused, with a retort that "she wanted to have a crack at him first." She struggled with the school system, as autism was unknown at the time, and Louis was moved from learning disability classes to mainstreaming to emotionally challenged classes to mainstreaming in a traditional class

setting. With his increasing lack of success, his mother kept Louis at home for three months. At age nine, Louis taught himself to read with his uncle's copies of MAD magazine. When his mother realized his interest, she purchased more issues. When Louis had jumped three reading levels in two months, the school asked her for an explanation, since they admitted that they had not done anything to bring this about. "That is quite an admission in itself," he reflects. When in 6th grade, for punishment, Louis was placed into an 8th grade social studies class covering the Depression. Since Louis had read about the Great Depression and Franklin Delano Roosevelt the year before, he got into a discussion with the teacher and stunned his fellow students. "After that, they left me alone since I was considered a misfit," said Bouchard.

With no support services, Louis admits he did trip up in high school and graduated third from the bottom in his class. In spite of that status, Louis considered himself 90 percent ready for college due to his independent study skills. After two years at a community college, the only school that would admit him, he graduated with majors in computer science and mathematics. Aiming to get into the workforce as soon as possible, he avoided schools that focused on advanced degrees, and was accepted by the Rochester Institute of Technology, where he received a degree in computer science. After an internship with IBM in New York, he was hired by IBM and moved to Rochester, Minnesota.

Louis credits two elements in his childhood for making him successful in the working world, one was his mother's belief in learning from the consequences of your actions and the other was his declassified status of learning disabled making him ineligible for special support services. "Even in middle school I had to take a shower or suffer the consequences," said Bouchard. "My mother's attitude was, 'I don't care. He has to suffer the consequences. I am not going to be there to do this all his life.'" When a choice was to be made between a more advanced technical high school and an honors high school, a principal who had seen his test scores had specific plans for Louis in his technical school. When Louis chose the honors high school, the principal pleaded in vain with his mother that Louis had made a mistake and that he should be at the technical school. She refused saying, "He made his choice and he will have to live with it."

Louis recommends that as early as possible young people with autism begin doing things for themselves and suggests doing laundry, washing dishes or cooking. Advising them to just cook their own favorite foods, says, "You need not know how to bake a wedding cake." Most importantly, he encourages young people to "be yourself as much as you can in the confines of this world." He also feels that the more students feel the responsibilities of their action, the better they will be prepared for college and the working world.

Bouchard advises young people to look at their strengths and use them to their advantage. When going into an interview he suggests that one ask the employer to spell out as specifically as possible what the job will involve and to be upfront with what one can and can not do. If the job is not something that one is able to do, he hopes that people can say so in the interview and explain that if the job changes that they would be interested. At the same time, Louis encourages people to work with compromise and accommodation. A significant accommodation in his current work is his ability to work most of the time without interruption so that he is able to focus on difficult programming issues while others in the company deal directly with the customer.

For fun, Bouchard examines his family genealogy and has a penchant for finding the "black sheep" of the family, uncovering many details that have been unknown. Louis ranks the public library as one of the best institutions around. He enjoys music and traveling and with his positive experience in a support group with the Autism Society of Minnesota, has started a support group for people with autism in Rochester. Bouchard is also involved on a state level to increase the understanding of people with disabilities through the Presbyterian Church in Minnesota, and serves on the steering committee of the Autism Society of Minnesota to help increase the employment of people with autism.