

An underused talent pool

Utilizing the skills of people with autism

By Kelly Thomalla

A rich talent pool of potential employees resides within Minnesota. These folks are loyal and productive; have problem-solving ingenuity; are detail and task oriented; and have integrity and perseverance.

And yet, most of these exceptional individuals can't get past the initial interview for a position.

These individuals, who often have excellent rote and long-term memories, high professional standards, and who may flourish with routine and repetitive tasks, also have autism spectrum disorder (ASD), the fastest-growing



developmental disability in Minnesota. The current diagnosis rate for ASD is one in 88.

According to a study released in the *Journal of American Academy of Pediatrics*, roughly half a million children with autism will reach adulthood in the next decade. Educating employers about autism and employment is an urgent matter.

"By overlooking this group of talented, focused individuals, employers are missing out," says Sherrie Kenny, executive director/CEO of the Autism Society of Minnesota (AuSM). "The gifts of autism can be put to work to bring success not only to companies, but also to our overall economy."

Successful companies, productive initiatives

Multiple Minnesota-based companies, including 3M, Best Buy, Cargill, Medtronic, and the Minnesota Department of Transportation, have worked with AuSM on diversity initiatives to increase employee awareness about autism and to expand inclusion goals through human resources, management, and employee teams.



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"We believe that a diverse workforce positions us to best serve our customers by bringing new ideas and innovation to our products and services," says Dave Baudler, president of Cargill AgHorizons.

Everyone has unique experiences, gifts, talents, and interests, and employees are successful when their work involves their strengths. Savvy employers know that matching the right person to the right job is a win-win. When employees with ASD are supported on the job, the challenges of ASD do not have to be barriers.

Interviewing skills are not usually a strong suit for a job seeker with ASD. Employers should keep some accommodations in mind when talking with a prospective employee, such as a preliminary interview by email to explore the candidate's qualifications; an in-person interview environment that is free of clutter, noise, and bright lights; specific and concise questions during the interview; and provision of a visual overview of the interview and expectations by creating a written list of what was discussed and details on next steps.

There is no single solution for accommodating people with ASD in the workplace because there is no one description of the behaviors and differences they may exhibit. Accommodations may be necessary to help with social and communication skills, organizational skills, and sensory challenges. Employers can make the work experience successful by: identifying a co-worker who can act as a mentor for the new employee with ASD; using a job or social coach to set up visual aids and schedules; having regularly scheduled meetings with the new employee at the end of each work day for feedback; and offering diversity training for the supervisor and the team the person with ASD will be joining.

A forum for ASD education

Realizing that education is key to successful employment of individuals with ASD, AuSM, in partnership with 3M, Best Buy, and Cargill, developed the Autism & Employment Forum, an annual event tailored for employers and individuals with ASD seeking employment.

"I knew we could reach out to more companies more quickly through a forum than by knocking on individual corporate doors," Kenny said.

More than 750 employers, families, service providers, and individuals affected by autism gathered at 3M corporate headquarters for the 2012 Autism & Employment Forum last October. Keynote



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speakers Dr. Stephen Shore, author and professor at Adelphi University, and Randy Lewis, senior vice president for supply chain and logistics at Walgreens, motivated the crowd.

"The speakers were excellent," said April Schnell with Specialisterne USA, a company that assesses, trains, and employs individuals with autism. "The presentations by companies and individuals with ASD added to the sense of momentum on the wonderful work that is going on in the community."

Shore spoke of the challenges he has faced as an individual living with ASD. He advised employers to look toward strengths. "Find the strengths of individuals with ASD and use those for fulfillment and productivity," Shore said.

Scott Badesch, president and CEO of the Autism Society of America said the Autism & Employment Forum was beyond wonderful. "As a professional, I found it heartwarming to see how good work is helping open so many new doors for so many," he said.

"As a father of a child with autism, I was given further hope that the world my son will live in will be one of kindness and caring for him as an employee," Badesch added.

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Raising awareness of autism goes beyond the forum. With more than 40 years of experience in education, advocacy, and support, AuSM has dedicated significant time and resources to foster relationships with corporations across Minnesota and to help professionals understand the benefits of employing adults with autism.

A range of resources

To realize its mission of enhancing the lives of those affected by ASD through employment opportunities, AuSM offers employment services to help companies develop awareness and strategies for successful employment, including:

- Basic Autism 101 workshops for HR or hiring managers
Sessions range from a one-hour overview of autism to a four-hour, comprehensive workshop on autism in the workplace.
- Autism awareness sessions for employee engagement sensitivity training
- Support resources and materials for employers, plus an e-learning tool (designed by Best Buy) customized for a company's work culture
- One-on-one sessions with management (to improve performance for direct reports)
- One-on-one sessions with employees to improve communication and outcomes
- Training for employees who are parents of children with autism on home/work balance challenges

AuSM and 3M have also collaborated on the creation of a customizable DVD series, designed for human resource personnel and hiring managers, that includes information on interviewing techniques, accommodation strategies, and acclimation of a new hire.

AuSM also has two audience-specific employment guides published in partnership with the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development and Vocational Rehabilitation Services: "Overlooked Talent: Investing in Employees with Autism," written for employers by employers on the benefits of hiring individuals with autism; and "Unlocked Potential: An Employment Guide for People with Autism," written to inspire and motivate individuals with ASD to seek meaningful, successful employment. The DVD series and employment guides are available from AuSM upon request.

Through education and awareness, employers are recognizing the talents autism can bring to the workplace, and these talents are bringing success.

Clydie Douglass, 3M's chief diversity officer, notes that 3M is committed to creating an inclusive work environment supportive of different work styles. "It is important that we help people with different work styles be successful," she says. "We also need to be able to recognize and leverage the unique capabilities of current and potential employees." ■

Kelly Thomalla is director of communications at the Autism Society of Minnesota (AuSM), an organization committed to education, advocacy, and support designed to enhance the lives of those affected by autism. For more information about autism and employment, visit the AuSM website, www.ausm.org.

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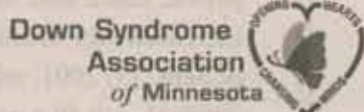
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