

Autism in the

Workplace

Diversity in the workplace is not a new concept. Over the past 30 years, companies have strived to foster inclusive environments for individuals across cultural, racial, ethnic, and gender lines. Today, diversity movements also champion more inclusive environments for individuals with disabilities such as autism, treating it and other related conditions as differences to be acknowledged rather than conditions to be cured.

Although the number of individuals diagnosed with autism has increased steadily, their rates of employment have not. The current unemployment rate for individuals with autism spectrum disorders (ASDs) is more than 60%, whereas that of individuals with other developmental disabilities is only 14%. But although individuals on the spectrum have trouble both obtaining and maintaining employment, they often possess qualifications and job skills that can make them important assets in the workplace. Some employers may need to adjust their perspective about people with ASDs, and occupational therapy practitioners can be key players in supporting this shift, encouraging neurodiversity in the workplace and helping adults with autism succeed professionally.

To start, this shift may require noticing the strength in something that may formerly have been perceived as a weakness. For example, the differences in how individuals on the spectrum process information often make them meticulously attentive to details that neurotypical individuals may overlook. Individuals with autism can also be highly independent and creative—competitive skills in today's market.

Divergent, creative thinkers drive innovation and can be key members on teams looking for new ways to address familiar problems. Individuals with autism also can have specific, focused areas of interest that can be driving passions for their work. Employees with autism can challenge the status quo and push their colleagues to think outside the box. Occupational therapy practitioners and special educators can use this strength-based perspective to identify how individuals with autism can lend their unique skills and talents to their work.

COMPANIES AT THE FOREFRONT

The tide is beginning to shift in the field of autism, and people are starting to embrace a more strengths-based perspective. The idea of “neurodiversity” as a whole is gaining popularity as companies are beginning to realize the untapped potential of employees on the autism spectrum. Corporations like Walgreens have developed specific programs to support individuals on the spectrum, as well as individuals with other developmental disabilities, and they are finding these diverse teams to be competitive. In a May 2013 blog posting, Tom Everill, CEO of the non-profit Northwest Center, which helps people with disabilities find employment, says that Walgreens, Procter &

Gamble, Glaxo Smith Kline, and IBM have come to appreciate “autism, Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, and so on not as problems to be solved but as qualities to be leveraged—qualities that often include extraordinary focus and obsession with detail” (<http://nwcenterblog.wordpress.com/2013/05/>).

For some, employing individuals on the spectrum makes sense—it's just good business. Specialized employment opportunities for individuals on the spectrum in engineering and technology have also boomed. The logical thinking and attention to detail of individuals with autism can be perfectly matched to software testing and data entry. The Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (ASAN) and its founder, Ari Ne'eman, the first presidential appointee to the Disability Council to have autism, have partnered with Freddie Mac, which is one of the world's largest mortgage companies. They are looking to create a paid internship program for recent high school graduates on the autism spectrum. Specialisterne, an international consulting company from Denmark, works to help individuals with autism secure meaningful employment. SAP, one of Specialisterne's current partners, sees the competitive advantage of employing individuals with ASDs as software testers, programmers, and data quality assurance

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A young woman works on a team of nine baristas—who are all on the autism spectrum—at three Atlanta auto dealerships' coffee bars for customers.

specialists in integrated employment settings.

MORE INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES: OT'S ROLE

Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations for applicants and employees who disclose disabilities such as autism, but many employers are not aware of what accommodations may be most effective. Employers looking to hire and support individuals on the autism spectrum can expect differences in how their employees with autism negotiate the sensory environment, communicate and process information, and interact with coworkers. Occupational therapy practitioners, in collaboration with other professionals, such as special educators, can support individuals with these differences by identifying appropriate accommodations. They can work with individuals on the spectrum to help them identify what they need to be successful, developing both their self-advocacy and independence skills. The following are some ways that an occupational therapy practitioner and other interprofessional team members can support an individual on the spectrum in the workplace.

Preparing for the interview process—

Occupational therapists can help individuals on the spectrum prepare for the interview process and increase the likelihood that they will be hired. Interviews can be extremely challenging for a potential employee on the spectrum who does not naturally and comfortably negotiate the social nuances of an interview. In fact, many highly qualified individuals on the spectrum never make it past the interview stage, despite their technical expertise. Expectations of sustained eye contact, “small talk,” and reciprocity in conversation can be difficult for an individual with an ASD, even in everyday situations. Some companies are even offering the option for prospective employees to represent themselves and their expertise through portfolios to mitigate the challenges of an in-person interview. But occupational therapy practitioners can work with individuals with an ASD to prepare them for in-person interviews by discussing what to expect, trouble-shooting potential problems, exploring “hidden social rules,” and role-playing scenarios. Occupational therapy practitioners can also begin the discussion about whether or not their clients will choose to disclose their condition and, if they

choose to do so, how that could be handled.

Modifying office lighting—Individuals on the spectrum may have highly attuned sensory systems and become agitated by environmental distractions that their colleagues may not perceive. Florescent lights, for example, emit a high frequency buzz as well as a visible flicker that can be very distracting to an individual with an ASD. Occupational therapists can help individuals advocate for their need for alternate lighting or offer strategies to help them negotiate challenging sensory experiences.

Finding quiet workspace—The communal workspaces of many of today's offices may work to support collaboration for the neurotypical employee, but they can be an overwhelming experience for the individual on the spectrum who works best in his or her own space. Occupational therapists can help individuals with an ASD recognize the environments in which they work best and support them in accessing alternate, quiet workspaces separate from excess noise and distractions, when necessary.

Taking short breaks—Individuals on the spectrum may have sensory regulation differences and benefit from



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opportunities for movement. Frequent, brief breaks in which individuals can take a quick walk or perform basic stretching can help many individuals with an ASD maintain optimum levels of arousal. Occupational therapists can help individuals recognize their self-regulation needs and identify specific strategies.

Asking for written agendas and plans—

Differences in communication style can lead to unnecessary misunderstandings and confusion among colleagues who have autism (and neurotypical colleagues, too). Nonverbal communication such as body language and tone of voice, along with idiomatic expressions, sarcasm, and other abstract language may be missed by an individual with an ASD. Agendas and agreed-on plans of action that are written can help to cut out the unnecessary “noise” in communication before, during, and following meetings to ensure that all parties are clear on the salient information. Occupational therapy practitioners can help individuals articulate this need and also explore how to use these supports to prepare for and follow up after a meeting.

Establishing organizational systems—

With relative strengths in focusing on details, some individuals on the spectrum can struggle with multi-tasking and establishing broader organizational systems necessary for efficiency. Occupational therapists can help individuals

establish and maintain organizational systems for their materials, as well as their time, and they can help ensure that all work is complete. This is especially important when attending to multiple, simultaneous projects is an expectation.

Identifying workplace mentors—

Occupational therapists can also help individuals identify specific colleagues whom they can go to with questions or to help with any difficulties. Occupational therapy practitioners can help to ensure that the identified mentor has an understanding of autism and some of the differences that may affect this individual in the workplace. This mentor can help if there are misunderstandings around “office politics” and help to brainstorm and problem solve with their mentee how to best address the situation.

Providing awareness training—

Creating a truly inclusive workforce requires more than adjusting the physical environment and providing specific accommodations; it is also about broadening the understanding about autism throughout the company. Many people know something about autism from the news, or maybe they have a colleague who has a child on the spectrum, but that does not mean that they know how to best collaborate with an individual with an ASD on a professional team. Occupational therapy practitioners and other interdisciplinary professionals

can provide training on understanding autism, especially from a strengths-based perspective, which is critical to ensure that employees who are neurotypical can benefit from the unique strengths of colleagues with autism and also to avoid any unnecessary misunderstandings. Companies like Square Peg Labs (www.squarepeglabs.com) and ASTEP (<http://asperger-employment.org/>) also provide training to companies on autism and strategies for including professionals with autism.

LOOKING TO TOMORROW

The landscape of today’s workforce is changing. The businesses of tomorrow will need to leverage the innovative thinking of a diverse workforce that includes individuals on the spectrum. Occupational therapy practitioners and special educators can help to provide accommodations, understanding, and acceptance, knowing that the workplace of tomorrow will benefit from the diversity only a truly inclusive environment provides. ■

Resources

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