

Working with autism works

Throughout Europe and around the world, companies large and small are discovering the mutual benefits of hiring people with autism. This article explores some of their diverse and innovative approaches.

Once thought to be a rare disorder, today between 1 in 100 and 1 in 150¹ children are diagnosed with autism. These children are growing up to become an increasing number of adults with autism – around 3.3 million in the European Union. While access to diagnosis and therapies for children with autism is improving across Europe, in most regions, they grow up to face widespread unemployment and little or no support as adults.

Studies have shown that between 76² and 90³ per cent of adults with autism are unemployed. Perhaps these statistics are not surprising, given that people with autism commonly experience difficulties with the social and communication aspects of work, including job interviews, understanding managers' instructions, managing their time and interaction with colleagues. Yet, the barriers to employment that people with autism face are not only caused by their autism. They also face much stigma and discrimination when trying to get or maintain a job. In fact, despite the barriers they face, adults with autism often really want to work and can be exceptionally capable of doing particular jobs. A study in the United Kingdom showed that 79 per cent of people with autism who receive unemployment payments from the government say they would like to work, with the right support.⁴ They simply need assistance to overcome the barriers they face.

Providing the right support to enable people with autism to work is exactly what a growing number of companies around the world are now doing. A well-known pioneer among them is Danish IT company, Specialisterne. Started in 2004 by the father of a young man with autism, the company employs a majority of people with autism. The employees with autism work on tasks such as software testing, programming and data-entry for corporate clients. Specialisterne sees the unique traits of people with autism such as attention to detail, enjoying repetitive tasks, lack of tolerance for errors, persistence and loyalty, as skills that may be harnessed to produce a high quality of work, making them a valuable asset to their employers. Now operating in 10 countries around the world, Specialisterne has already helped several hundred people with autism to find jobs and has a grand vision: to enable the creation of one million jobs around the world for people with autism. To achieve this vision, the company also works with external companies including Nokia, Deloitte, Cisco, Microsoft and Oracle, to create jobs for people with autism and provide recruitment, training and support services for these employees. For example, Specialisterne is currently working with multinational German software company, SAP, to create jobs around the world for people with autism. Starting in India and Ireland, the company has hired employees with autism to work on software testing and similar tasks. SAP sees a potential competitive advantage to leveraging the unique talents of people with autism, while also helping them to secure meaningful employment. Based on the success of the program so far, the company has now decided to increase the proportion of its employees with autism to around one per cent by 2020.

¹ [Autism-Europe](#), 2009, *Persons with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Identification, Understanding, Intervention*.

² [The National Autistic Society](#) via the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services.

³ [Autism Speaks](#); [Specialisterne](#); [Aspiritech](#); United Kingdom Office for National Statistics (2001), *Census Report*

⁴ [The National Autistic Society](#) via the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services.

In almost every workplace, social and communication skills among employees are necessary to enable everyday problems to be solved and unforeseen tasks to get done. When employees with autism have difficulties to handle these tasks due to the limitations of their condition, there must be a way to deal with this. A small software testing company in Belgium, called Passwerk, has strategies to handle these situations in the workplace. Inspired by Specialisterne, Passwerk employs people who have autism and provides training and coaching for its employees not only in professional development, but also in social skills development, tailored to each employee's individual needs. In addition, when an employee is unable to carry out a particular task, due to the limitations of their autism, a 'job coach' will step in to assist. Passwerk has one job coach for every seven employees with autism. The job coaches work closely with the employees with autism, acting as a first point of contact for both employees and customers. As in most workplaces, each employee's skills are put to use in the most appropriate and efficient way possible, so that together the team gets the job done well.

Although the stereotype of people with autism being good at working with computers seems to ring true to some extent, this is certainly not the only field in which people with autism can work. In the United States, a small farming business called Green Bridge Growers, was founded by the parents of a young man with autism who had graduated from university but found the social challenges of the workplace too difficult. The small company is succeeding to grow produce all year-round, primarily using a method called aquaponics where fish and vegetables grow in harmony. The company now employs a number of individuals on the autism spectrum and finds that the scheduling, precision and monitoring required in aquaponics is a terrific match for their skills.

Green Bridge Growers was founded to deal with a problem that highly intelligent adults with autism often face. After finishing secondary school, there are often few educational and employment opportunities suited to people with autism. A survey launched by Autism-Europe showed that only 37 per cent of adults with autism across Europe were able to receive professional and/or continuous training.⁵ For those who do manage to complete secondary school or even university, the social and communication challenges and lack of support and understanding of their condition, often lead them to be unable to get or maintain a job in the mainstream workforce. A study in the United Kingdom showed that 26 per cent of graduates with autism are unemployed; around twice the proportion of any other disability group.⁶

With so many adults with autism who are willing and available to work, initiatives to employ people with autism are succeeding, and the idea is spreading around the world. This phenomenon is not only a result of initiatives specifically designed to employ people with autism, it is also a result of large international companies who want to achieve social as well as business goals and create a more diverse workforce. In 2007, Walgreens, a chain of pharmacies in the United States, opened a new distribution centre where more than 40 per cent of its staff are people with disabilities, including some with autism. An on-site training facility helps those with special needs become prepared for the job and all employees, with and without disabilities, meet the same productivity goals. Walgreens aims to fill 10 percent of its distribution centre production jobs with people with disabilities, and is already more than halfway towards reaching this goal.

⁵ [Survey launched by Autism-Europe](#) in 2001-02 among its members and any interested European organisations via the European Disability Forum and the Platform of European Social NGOs.

⁶ [The National Autistic Society](#) via the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services.

In Italy, cosmetic company L'Oréal has begun a long-term project to facilitate the employment of people with autism throughout their company. Aiming to integrate young adults in particular into their workforce, L'Oréal is working with Fondazione TEDA (an association for autism) to develop the project. Activities proposed to people with autism include administration tasks such as working with databases, updating files, data entry and archiving, as well as packaging cosmetics, quality checking, security and other tasks. The company has created training for employees with autism, other staff and managers and designated specific staff members to act as coaches for employees with autism. L'Oréal also has a policy to ensure they employ people with disabilities in at least two per cent of positions within the company. The company has found that strong cooperation with people with autism and the autism association, Fondazione TEDA, have been critical to the success of the project so far.

L'Oréal's long-term approach to employing people with autism reflects both a long-term commitment to people with autism as well as a smart business strategy. Research has shown that companies that have employees with disabilities report better staff retention rates, reducing the high cost of staff turnover. Other studies reveal that after one year of employment, the retention rate of people with disabilities is 85 per cent⁷.

Another inspiring example of employing people with autism is a group of people with autism who are creating jobs for themselves. The Laboratory of Exploratory Multimedia (LEM) Cooperative in Italy was founded in 2007 by a group of adults with Asperger syndrome who discovered through their conversations on an email list that they had a common difficulty of finding a satisfying job despite their technical and professional skills. The cooperative they formed now offers comprehensive services in web design, graphic design, desktop publishing and translation. They have also completed a project to train a small group of people with autism in digital archiving. Not only focused on work, the cooperative also organises social and cultural activities for people with autism.

While all people with autism have lifelong difficulties in communicating with, and relating to, other people, autism is a spectrum condition, which means that it affects each person differently. Some people with autism are able to live relatively independent lives, going to university and developing professional skills, while others may have accompanying learning disabilities and need a lifetime of specialist support, 24 hours per day. But despite the level of their disability, that doesn't mean these people are unable to work at all.

Fondazione Oltre Labirinto onlus in Italy is developing Villaggio Monica Migotto, a residence and social enterprise for adults with autism in the Italian province of Veneto. With a focus on local tourism, residents will be able to engage in employment activities including a working farm, food store, market, bakery, restaurant, bicycle hire and a campervan parking area. Some adults with autism will be able to fully earn their own living, while others (due to the severity of their autism) will make a modest contribution to their personal needs. As well as providing employment for the residents, these activities aim to enable the residents to interact with, and play a meaningful role in, their local community, and make the village financially sustainable. The construction of Villaggio Monica Migotto began in 2008 and continues today.

⁷ Unger, D. D., 2002, 'Employer's attitudes toward persons with disabilities in the workforce: myths or realities? Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities'.

The social interaction provided by work at Villaggio Monica Migotto and other workplaces provides a way to overcome a barrier that many adults with autism face: social isolation. A survey by Autism-Europe⁸ found that across Europe, social life for people with autism remains difficult, if not non-existent, in the majority of the cases. Without employment, many adults with autism are socially isolated and largely dependent on family and social support.

Employment is more than just a job for people with autism – it enables them to live more fulfilling and independent lives. Companies around the world are also realising that employing people with autism goes beyond philanthropy and corporate social responsibility; utilising their skills and creating a more diverse workforce can help companies succeed, benefiting everyone involved.

More information:

<http://www.autismeurope.org/campaigns/autism-and-employment/>

⁸ [Survey launched by Autism-Europe](#) in 2001-02 among its members and any interested European organisations via the European Disability Forum and the Platform of European Social NGOs.