

Employment: SAP & Autism at Work Program

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Workers with disabilities: SAP's Autism at Work program cited as model of success



Joe Cintas, an employee in SAP's Autism at Work program, works with program mentor and design team member Carol Farnsworth Tuesday morning, Dec. 9, 2014, at the company's offices in Palo Alto, Calif. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

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George Brown, left, and Joe Cintas, employees in SAP's Autism at Work program, pose for a photograph Monday, Nov. 24, 2014, at the company's office in Palo Alto, Calif. (Karl Mondon/Bay Area News Group)

PALO ALTO — Pick a date, any date in history, and Joe Cintas can tell you, with only a moment's pause, what day of the week it was.

Diagnosed with autism at age 3, Cintas wields astonishing brain power when it comes to numbers and finding patterns, but, like many with his disability, his talents often have been overlooked in the workplace. Despite having a college degree in environmental studies, he spent the past 14 years pushing carts as a grocery store clerk before finding his niche at SAP, where he makes good money testing medical software for bugs.

Cintas' life changed in March when he was hired at SAP's Palo Alto office, along with six other employees, as part of the German software company's groundbreaking Autism at Work program. Developed with Danish company Specialisterne, a pilot project proved successful in India, so SAP brought it to the U.S., first to Silicon Valley and later to Pennsylvania, Germany, Canada, and next year, Brazil. So far, 42 employees with autism have been hired at eight SAP locations around the world.

"I never felt comfortable in an interview process; I didn't know how to express myself properly," Cintas said. "Working here at SAP has been a dream come true for me. I don't know what I would've done had I not been hired here. I would've continued to flounder professionally and emotionally."

Most paid a low wage

While company programs for hiring autistic employees are nothing new, they've usually involved low-wage, simple tasks. SAP is among the first to embrace the idea that some of those with autism can excel in skilled positions.

Initially limited to software testing, the program quickly spread to other areas, including software development, customer support and graphic design. Impressed with the early success, SAP is planning to bring the program to its other Bay Area offices in Dublin, South San Francisco and possibly Sunnyvale.

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"We hire people in spite of autism and because of autism," said Jose Velasco, head of SAP's Autism at Work program in the U.S. "It's not a disability play; it's a skills play."

In general, Velasco said, many autistic employees can concentrate on repetitive tasks for long periods, have superior attention to detail, communicate honestly, and bring new perspectives to the workplace — all traits employers can use to their competitive advantage. The biggest challenge for the program thus far, Velasco said, hasn't had anything to do with issues related to autism; it's been keeping up with the barrage of requests for information. SAP has been approached by 30 companies interested in starting their own versions, Velasco said, including 12 in the Bay Area.

In a society trained to see eye contact and a firm handshake as signs of a desirable employee, many adults with autism struggle in typical job interviews. SAP doesn't conduct interviews; instead, recruiters observe as candidates build robots out of LEGOS, and they are evaluated on teamwork and their ability to follow instructions.

The approach provides candidates with a relaxing environment and gives employers time to discover the prospective employee's special skills.

Support from employer

New hires are presented with a strong circle of support, including trained job coaches, team buddies and mentors who provide them with a valuable social outlet. The employees and their mentors shoot the breeze, have lunch and engage in activities outside of work, like chess matches and potluck dinners with family and co-workers.

Mark Lazarus, a development architect at SAP, had a personal interest in joining the program as a mentor. Having a son diagnosed with autism, he's agonized over how his child would survive after college.

"There were many nights I wouldn't sleep; you don't know what's going to happen with the future," Lazarus said. "This program tells all parents with kids on the spectrum, 'There is hope. Don't give up.' It's the light at the end of the tunnel."

SAP has committed to hiring 650 people with autism — 1 percent of its 65,000 global employees — by 2020. In doing so, the company is fishing from a largely untapped labor pool.

The number of people diagnosed with autism is growing rapidly nationally — one in 68 children were autistic in 2010, up from one in 150 in 2000, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In California, unemployment rates among those with Autism Spectrum

Disorder exceed 90 percent, according to Maria Nicolacoudis, executive director of Expandability, a San Jose nonprofit that secures jobs for people with disabilities.

“There’s always a supply and demand issue,” Nicolacoudis said. “This would be a good time to hire people with disabilities, especially autism, but it has a lot to do with changing the ways people think about autism ... The interest is there; it’s converting it to action.”

Loves the gadgets

SAP employee George Brown said that in his life some aspects of his autism have been a benefit, such as hyperconcentration, his meticulous planning and ability to pick out minor details. A self-proclaimed “tinkerer,” Brown loves electronics, sporting the nickname “Radio Shack Man” for his affinity for gadgets. At SAP, he prepares software packages for production, earning enough to live on his own and spend money on — naturally — more electronics.

Brown also is dyslexic and has trouble with handwriting, but he makes up for it with excellent typing speed. He took the job, he said, to help people with autism from being “pigeonholed.” “People who have a disability learn to adapt and sometimes exceed expectations in other areas,” Brown said. “There is more than one way of doing things ... If you have the right accommodations, you can excel.”

While SAP is by far the largest company to push for hiring autistic employees, it isn’t the first. For more than 25 years, Livermore’s Ratermann Manufacturing has had a work site at the Morgan Autism Center in San Jose where about a dozen autistic men and women are paid minimum wage to assemble parts for use with compressed gas tanks. Ratermann provides supplies and faxes orders; the crew fills them and ships them out.

Drugstore chain Walgreens also has an initiative for hiring autistic workers at its distribution centers, and is in the process of expanding it to its retail stores. With SAP paving the way, autism advocates hope more opportunities are on the horizon.

“It’s like the hundredth monkey effect,” said Morgan Autism Center’s Jennifer Sullivan.

“Everybody’s coming to the conclusion at the same time that these people have talent. It’s a question of: How do we harness their abilities?”