

Companies Find Hiring Those On The Spectrum Has Vast Benefits

by Alexia Elejalde-Ruiz, Chicago Tribune/TNS | June 15, 2016



Jordan Allison, 21, who has autism, works as a swatch and button specialist in the special order department at Hart Schaffner Marx in Des Plaines, Ill. (Jose M. Osorio/Chicago Tribune/TNS)

Doug Williams started noticing the signs when his son was six months old.

The absence of facial expressions. The drift of his gaze. Eventually, the agitation.

The official autism diagnosis came more than a year later, along with the whirlwind of figuring out schools and therapies. Not until his son, Hayden, reached high school and Williams glimpsed him as an adult did a fresh wake-up call hit.

What happens next?

Williams, CEO of suit-maker Hart Schaffner Marx, hopes to help answer that question for the many families worried about the same thing.

An estimated 50,000 individuals with autism graduate from high school every year, entering an adulthood without the supports they enjoyed in childhood.

More than a third find themselves not working or attending school in their early 20s, according to a report last year from the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute at Drexel University in Philadelphia. They are said to step off a “services cliff,” with half receiving no life skills or vocational training during that transitional young adult period.

Hart Schaffner Marx, a nearly 130-year-old clothier that counts President Barack Obama among its clients, is making room at its Des Plaines, Ill. factory for what Williams says is a vastly underutilized segment of the workforce, and hopes to set an example for other companies to follow.

“You’re not an island, you are part of a community,” Williams said. “You can choose to be a positive part.”

With the help of a company called Autism Workforce, the suit manufacturer has retooled everything from its employment applications to the signage on the factory floor to fit how people with autism live and think, rather than expecting them to adapt to the “neurotypical” world.”

All tax forms are now color-coded. All applications have small pictures to offer visual cues. Customized job descriptions detail whether a position requires a lot of fine motor skills or will take place in an environment where smells and sounds are strong, so applicants and their parents know whether it would be a proper fit.

Green plants were added to the office for a calming effect. Light bulbs were changed from harsh fluorescents to LEDs. Yellow lines painted on the ground help people navigate the factory floor.

A central feature is a new exercise room where employees with autism do a 30-minute workout before starting their shifts, performing sit-ups and bicep curls under the eye of an exercise coach. The room is designed in blue because it is a soothing color, and has an artificial-grass sensory wall to give users something to touch if that helps.

Research has shown vigorous exercise reduces maladaptive behaviors among kids with autism, such as hyperactivity and aggression, helping to keep them attentive and on task, said David Geslak, founder and president of Autism Workforce, a division of Chicago-based Exercise Connection.

Williams said the investment is a business imperative because autism is a part of the labor force that neither he nor his peers in the C-suite can ignore.

One in 68 children are diagnosed with autism, up from one in 150 a decade earlier likely because of changes to diagnostic criteria. Autism is a developmental disorder characterized by varied symptoms on a spectrum of severity. Some people have cognitive deficits, others have trouble communicating and others are high-functioning but struggle with social interaction.

Williams' company is among several seeing the value of embracing autism in the workplace, especially for the repetitive and structured tasks that are less dependent on social graces than a detail-oriented and focused mind.

Ford this month kicked off a pilot program funded by the Autism Alliance of Michigan to give individuals with autism on-the-job training in product development, with the chance to be considered for a job.

Deerfield, Ill.-based Walgreens, which became a leader on the issue thanks to a senior vice president with a son with autism, counts about 12 percent of its distribution center employees as having a self-disclosed disability, many on the autism spectrum.

Microsoft last year launched a small pilot program to hire at least 10 people with autism for full-time positions such as software engineer and data analyst. German software company SAP has made it a goal to have 1 percent of its workforce composed of people on the autism spectrum.

Northwestern University recently hired its first employee from Project SEARCH, a program that puts young adults with autism through three 10-week internships at the university. The employee will be performing clerical and support roles in its office of alumni relations and development.

Other organizations make autism central to their business model.

AutonomyWorks in Downers Grove, Ill. employs 20 associates, all of whom have autism, to perform back-office digital advertising tasks for corporate clients, said David Friedman, founder and CEO.

Friedman, a former president of marketing at Sears Holdings, said he used to run a digital agency and "there was not enough pizza and beer in the world" to keep the neurotypical college graduates he employed engaged while performing similar mundane tasks.

But for people with autism, the job, which starts at minimum wage, lights a path to a future, Friedman said. Turnover is less than 10 percent.

He has seen the impact on his 21-year-old son, who has autism and was so well-supported in high school that his son kept looking back on those glory days once they were over. Since starting work part-time at AutonomyWorks, he has been asking for more hours and pay and taking keyboarding classes at College of DuPage.

"It's changed his view of his life to be forward-looking instead of backward-looking," Friedman said.

There is heightened awareness that people with autism have desirable talents, said Brenda Weitzberg, executive director of Aspiritech, a Highland Park, Ill.-based nonprofit that employs 35 people on the autism spectrum as software testers for corporate clients.

Her 37-year-old son has Asperger's, a high-functioning form of autism, and works part-time at Aspiritech, which starts employees at \$12.

But most of the budding corporate initiatives are small and often target only those with high-level skills, she said.

To address the scope and diversity of autism, "we need every single company to find work that can be done by individuals on the spectrum and accommodate some of the social quirksiness," Weitzberg said.

At Hart Schaffner Marx, Williams has invested more than \$500,000 over the past two years, including wages, to create a model for welcoming employees with autism so that other companies can emulate it.

It was important to get buy-in from his employees, who number close to 700, he said. During the company's annual summer picnic, Williams asked people to raise their hands if they have a friend, family member or neighbor with autism. He said two-thirds did so.

"That was a game changer," he said. "Everybody saw what a big deal it was. It wasn't just a CEO sitting in a conference room saying this is important to me."

The company now has three people with autism working there.

One is Marice Aiston, 24, whose newly created role as expeditor is dedicated to getting made-to-measure suit orders into production quickly. And expedite she does.

Carrying a stack of custom orders and with a white flower clipped into her ponytail, Aiston walks briskly through the factory, arms swinging, zipping past rows of women working at sewing machines and cutting fabrics, to deliver the paperwork to the production team.

Back at her desk, she types with one hand while she holds the other up to block a light on her computer monitor. A Post-it note covers a flashing light on her desktop scanner. Some people with autism have sensory sensitivities, such as to light.

Nearby, 21-year-old Jordan Allison, a swatch specialist with the customer service team, pulls requests for fabric samples. He lines the blues, grays and blacks in a neat row, counting and crossing off the completed orders with a yellow highlighter, leaning so close that his nose nearly touches the page.

At both of their desks are binders with step-by-step instructions for their tasks, with visual prompts, in case they need a reminder. They also have headphones in case a fire alarm goes off.

The third person with autism working at Hart Schaffner Marx is Max Gulias, a 20-year-old independent contractor who shoots training videos.

He has created a video the company plans to use to train people in how to fold cardboard boxes, and is working on another that tells new autism hires what to expect.

“It’s a lot of fun,” he said after showing off his work.

Gulias’ mother, Barbara Norris Coates, said his self-confidence has grown, and he feels proud to be doing a job that helps other people with autism.

She had worried about Gulias’ post-high-school transition and feared that her son, a creative person, would be pigeonholed into a strictly vocational career.

The company is set to start hiring for a fourth position, a stock associate tasked with folding cardboard boxes. The position, created to improve shipping production, could be appropriate for someone who is nonverbal or lower-performing on the spectrum, Geslak said.

Autism Workforce, which has approval to hire 10 people with autism at Hart Schaffner Marx, plans to next hire in IT, accounting or manufacturing.

Williams said the initiative has created positive energy at the company. It also has improved productivity on the special orders team, thanks to Aiston’s expediting.

Both Aiston and Allison earn the state minimum wage of \$8.25 an hour, an important part of the program, Williams said, because people with autism often are relegated to unpaid or token work. Pay can be a tricky line to walk for some families, though, because if they earn too much, they may lose some benefits.

Aiston and Allison were referred to Hart Schaffner Marx by Have Dreams, an Evanston, Ill.-based autism resource organization that serves more than 150 individuals a week.

Kris Johnsen, founder and executive director, said a large gap in adult autism services leaves many people struggling to adapt to the social climate of a workplace. The first wave of young adults who experienced strong autism supports as kids are showing that the traditional developmental disability resources available to them in adulthood don’t quite fit their needs, Johnsen said.

Despite the challenges, Have Dreams, which operates several job training programs that help place people with autism into jobs, has more employers lined up to hire than they have ready applicants.

Johnsen said that’s because once kids leave the school system — and they must at 22 — it is hard to find them. She is certain many are sitting in their parents’ basements, playing video games and filling out applications online that go nowhere, or result in awkward phone interviews.

A lack of education among managers about how to work with people with autism is among the greatest challenges to securing them in jobs, said Ashley Palomino, director of programs at Autism Workforce.

The team put 125 people at Hart Schaffner Marx through training to better understand what autism is. They learned that it takes many people with autism a while to process information, so when a question goes unanswered for a long time, better to wait it out than ask it again and start the processing all over again.

Autism Workforce in May also started a program that brings individuals with autism into Hart Schaffner Marx to have mock interviews with the human resources manager, who gives feedback so they can practice. Human resources is learning how to conduct interviews as well, rephrasing questions keeping in mind that people with autism often take the words very literally.

Ellen Shaw, vice president of customer service and Allison's supervisor at Hart Schaffner Marx, said some employees were unsure at first whether to approach the new hires. But soon enough Allison would introduce himself to them.

Allison caught on quickly and has been easy to work with, she said. The times he has gotten frustrated, he has told her he needs a moment and walks away, she said.

Shaw said she has been most struck by how badly he wants to be treated like everyone else. When Allison, who works until midday, saw that most people didn't leave until 3:30 p.m., he told Shaw he should stay until then too.

Allison's father, Stephen Allison, a lawyer and entrepreneur, said having meaningful work is "a blessing" for his son. The family started a festival vendor business called College Corn, selling ears of corn at the city's big summer festivals, in order to give Jordan and some of his friends paid work when no one else would, he said.

"Most employers don't reach and accommodate," he said. "They take the path of least resistance."

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