

Ford steps up effort to hire people with autism

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DETROIT -- Ford Motor Co. plans next year to hire an additional 12 to 24 adults with autism, expanding a program with the Autism Alliance of Michigan that has more than 30 other local companies signed on.

The programs are growing quickly. For the companies, people with autism represent untapped talent, and the jobs mean an opportunity to earn a living for those on the spectrum who have typically been left behind.

In June, the automaker launched its pilot program by hiring four adults with autism who have college degrees to work in its product development department at its world headquarters. Those four were on temporary status, but have since been become regular employees at the automaker. Ford originally committed to hiring five employees, but two part-time positions were combined to create one full-time position to accommodate an exemplary candidate.

"When we started, we wanted to make sure we could do this and do it sustainably," said Kirstin Queen, manager of diversity and inclusion at Ford. "The program was found to be very successful, and the supervisors have said these individuals brought a new energy that spread to other employees."

The challenge of employing an adult with autism, while all are different, usually lies in the realm of social interactions. Employees with autism can lack social skills and social imagination and are often brutally honest, which can come across as rudeness.

The program was developed with the Autism Alliance of Michigan, a nonprofit founded by Dave Meador, vice chairman and chief administrative officer at DTE Energy Co. Autism Alliance trained Ford staffers how to interact with their new colleagues with autism, including creating direct, concise job functions as well as understanding the employees' social limitations.

Ford's vehicle evaluation and verification test lab participated in the pilot program, and Ford will expand the new hires into information technology and digital innovation departments, Queen said.

The 60- to 90-day ramp-up process has begun, and the jobs are expected to be filled in January.

The new positions will require a bachelor's degree, as did the previous positions.

Ford receives a federal work opportunity tax credit of \$2,400 per adult with autism it hires. That credit, however, does not completely offset the costs of the program, said Colleen Allen, president and CEO of the Autism Alliance.

Since Ford began its program in June, dozens of other companies have sought similar programs through the Autism Alliance. The organization is working with 38 companies, either on creating programs or are already commencing pilot programs.

Allen declined to name the other companies as they navigate through their initial pilot programs, but they include 10 banking and finance firms, seven manufacturing companies, three IT companies and others in different industries.

"The expressed interest has shot through the roof this year," Allen said. "We're definitely ahead of the curve nationally."

Allen said the only limitation is the organizations' ability to keep up with demand. Roughly 200 adults with autism are looking to get placed.

"We're not in a hurry; we're not going to just dump someone in an open position," Allen said. "This is a thoughtful process, and we want to make sure we get it right" to benefit the employee and encourage the company to participate further.

Autism represents a hefty economic question as more and more of those diagnosed reach working age. It's imperative that employers adapt or miss out on a productive population with specialized skills, Allen said.

Autism's costs are growing -- estimated at \$268 billion annually in the U.S. on treatment and loss of productivity in 2015, rising to \$461 billion, or 1 percent of U.S. gross domestic product, by 2025, according to a 2015 study by researchers at the University of California-Davis and the

University of Denver. Diabetes and attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder are the only diseases that cost more than autism, and neither generally prevents people who have them from working.

In the U.S., it's estimated that more than 3.5 million people and one in 68 children (one in 42 for boys) being born have autism spectrum disorder — a complex brain condition associated with poor communication skills — according to a 2014 Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study. In Michigan, the state estimates there are 50,000 or more adults with autism, and growing.

It's called a spectrum because the symptoms can range from not understanding nonverbal communication, to lack of empathy, to obsessive-compulsive behavior, to never speaking. Less-severe cases are often called Asperger's syndrome, but many experts no longer use that term.

More than half of people diagnosed with autism have average to above-average intelligence, according to a 2014 study.

Companies are becoming more aware of the benefits of hiring adults with autism, thanks to early adopters like Walgreen Co.

In 2007, Walgreens opened a distribution center in Anderson, S.C., and piloted a program to employ workers with disabilities -- 33 percent of the nearly 300 workers at that time -- many of whom had autism. To accommodate workers with autism, managers are instructed to avoid metaphors and use direct instruction and outfit a break room with beanbag chairs and puzzles to calm workers with autism who may feel sensory overload from the loud, often frantic pace of a distribution center, Workforce magazine reported in 2012.

The Anderson center now employs more than 40 percent with disabilities, and Walgreen opened a similar facility in Connecticut in 2009.

Allen said Southeast Michigan will be successful when autism hiring expands beyond seeking highly skilled adults with autism and looks to match those in every category with jobs they can do.

"There's a perception now that those on the spectrum are these really smart, highly functional people," Allen said. "Not everyone has three degrees."

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