



Michael Bernick Contributor

I write about emerging employment structures, policy and law.

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BUSINESS 12/13/2016 @ 11:04AM | 17,665 views

Where Is Autism Employment Heading In 2017?



Dr. Temple Grandin speaks on autism employment.

Where is employment for adults with autism and other neurodiverse (developmental and learning) differences heading in 2017? What employment assistance or initiatives offer the greatest promise? If you want to help someone you know who is part of the neurodiverse workforce what should you be doing in 2017?

To begin, the current year saw a range of employment initiatives, most of them extra-governmental, often driven by the energy of persons on the autism spectrum, advocates and parents. These initiatives might be grouped among three primary strategies.

“Autism at Work” and other targeted hiring and retention efforts by large employers: Microsoft’s “Autism at Work” initiative has been the highest profile effort in 2016 by a major employer, targeting recruitment of adults on the spectrum and retention structures. But 2016 also has seen the growth of the Autism at Work initiative by software giant SAP, as well as targeted autism employment initiatives at several other prominent tech firms: Salesforce, Google, Cable Labs, Hewlett Packard and CollabNet.

Further, firms outside of tech are developing

autism employment initiatives, often in partnership with Specialisterne, the consulting firm specializing in autism employment. Among these non-tech employers in 2016 have been Best Buy, Deloitte, Willis Towers Watson and Ford Motor.

Autism-focused businesses: Small businesses are being launched as “social enterprises,” specifically to hire adults on the autism spectrum, and build on the employment strengths of adults with autism. The [Rising Tide Car Wash](#), the Florida-based car wash chain, is probably the best known, emphasizing the attention to detail and loyalty of its employees with autism. Other autism-focused businesses in 2016 are [ULTRA Testing](#) (software testing), [Spectrum Designs](#) (shirt design), [Platinum Bay Software](#), [Chocolate Spectrum](#) (chocolatiers) and [SMILE Biscotti](#), to name a few of the more than 50 nationwide.

Self-employment and internet-based creative collectives: For adults on the spectrum, as for all adults, the internet is opening new employment opportunities. [Picasso Einstein](#), the [Art of Autism](#) and the [Autistic Creatives Collective](#) are all internet-based platforms to showcase the works of adults with autism who are painters, artists, musicians, writers and photographers.

Looking to 2017, we can expect each of these three employment approaches to continue. The autism-focused businesses, like most small businesses, are the most fragile, and some likely will cease operations in 2017. At the same time, universities and foundations are experimenting with campaigns to sharpen the social enterprise approach — in June 2016, for example, the University of Miami with the Taft Foundation announced the “*Awakening the Autism Entrepreneur*” campaign, a \$510,000 campaign to train and move forward autism-focused businesses.

The self-employment and internet-based platforms will continue in 2017, and be joined by others. These platforms do not carry any significant overhead, and will build on the creative activity in the autism community. Going forward, though, these platforms must compete in the very competitive broader eco-system of internet-based platforms for creative activities. Part of their challenge remains to identify the market niche nationwide (even worldwide) of buyers specifically attracted to goods and services

by persons on the autism spectrum.

By far, the greatest number of job opportunities among the three job strategies in 2017 will be in the first noted above: autism employment with major firms (and mid-sized firms). The major firm employment initiatives so far have been pushed by persons within the firms who have family members or acquaintances on the spectrum. Given the demographics of autism, these numbers and the push for action within the firms will grow. Additionally, we can expect other creative employment variants, such as the autism apprenticeships in healthcare information developed in 2016 by Mark Grein with the AHIMA foundation.

So there is reason to look forward to increasing the work rate of adults on the autism spectrum in 2017.

But all of the activity should not obstruct the “Great Disconnect” that AASCEND co-chair and long-time autism advocate Camilla Bixler refers to. This is the disconnect between the superstructure of autism employment energy, initiatives and publicity, and the employment situations of the great majority of adults on the spectrum. The initiatives above and other related initiatives reach no more than 10-15 percent of adults on the spectrum.

Looking to 2017, [David Kearon](#) the employment specialist at Autism Speaks recognizes the disconnect, but sees a momentum growing as success at some firms brings others on board. He writes:

“Moving forward, I think we as a community need to learn from the successes of the programs at companies like SAP and Microsoft — and also from small businesses like AutonomyWorks and ULTRA Testing — and apply them to other industries in which greater numbers of people with autism could contribute. I also think we need greater emphasis on strategies to help individuals with autism retain these jobs once they’ve been hired. I’m concerned that some programs move on too quickly after job placement, as if the work is done. For many people with autism, some type of ongoing support is critical to their success (and that of the business, as well). I am hopeful that over time, the cultures of these businesses can transform enough to provide these necessary supports in a natural way to employees who are differently-abled. Then, this movement will be

truly sustainable.”

Dr. Hackie Reitman is an orthopedic surgeon in Florida who in 2016 founded DifferentBrains.com to promote neurodiversity in hiring, and spends much of his time now traveling throughout the country to meet with local employment initiatives. Looking to 2017, he notes that “Recently I was part of *Trailblazing 2016*, the autism entrepreneurship event put on in Broward County by Minerva and Boaz Santiago of the online platform, Picasso Einstein; then meetings with persons on the spectrum and advocates starting their own employment initiatives in Colorado, Tennessee and California. It’s not just the Microsofts and the Googles who have very high functioning employees with Asperger’s syndrome. It also can and must be the offices, the service businesses, the repetitive work that speaks to a workforce that enjoys doing it, are loyal employees, will never lie, will not call in sick and will be grateful to gain the gift of independence. Society needs to understand and embrace neurodiversity for the benefit of all of us. It’s amazing to see the grassroots initiatives.”

Indeed, the autism employment growth in 2017 is likely to continue to be locally-generated and locally-based. Which leads to what we can do in the next year if we want to help someone on the spectrum find a job or the autism employment community generally.

On a community level, each of the three categories of initiatives offers opportunity. We can encourage hiring of adults on the spectrum within our company, especially if we work for a large employer. We can support autism-focused businesses and autism-based internet marketplaces.

On an individual basis, we can use our business contacts to help job seekers get in the door (a personal referral remains the best way to hire). We can refer job seekers to the network of thousands of job developers with state employment departments, departments of rehabilitation and community providers. Most job seekers on the spectrum in 2017 will need and benefit from the low-tech, one-to-one traditional job counseling that these job developers provide, usually free of cost.

And we cannot forget the full range of persons on the autism spectrum. Many of the employment initiatives in 2016 have been aimed at those with

higher levels of technical or functional skills. As David Kearon adds, “In 2017 and beyond, I think we need a more focused effort on creating opportunities for people across the autism spectrum — not just for those who are less impacted.”

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