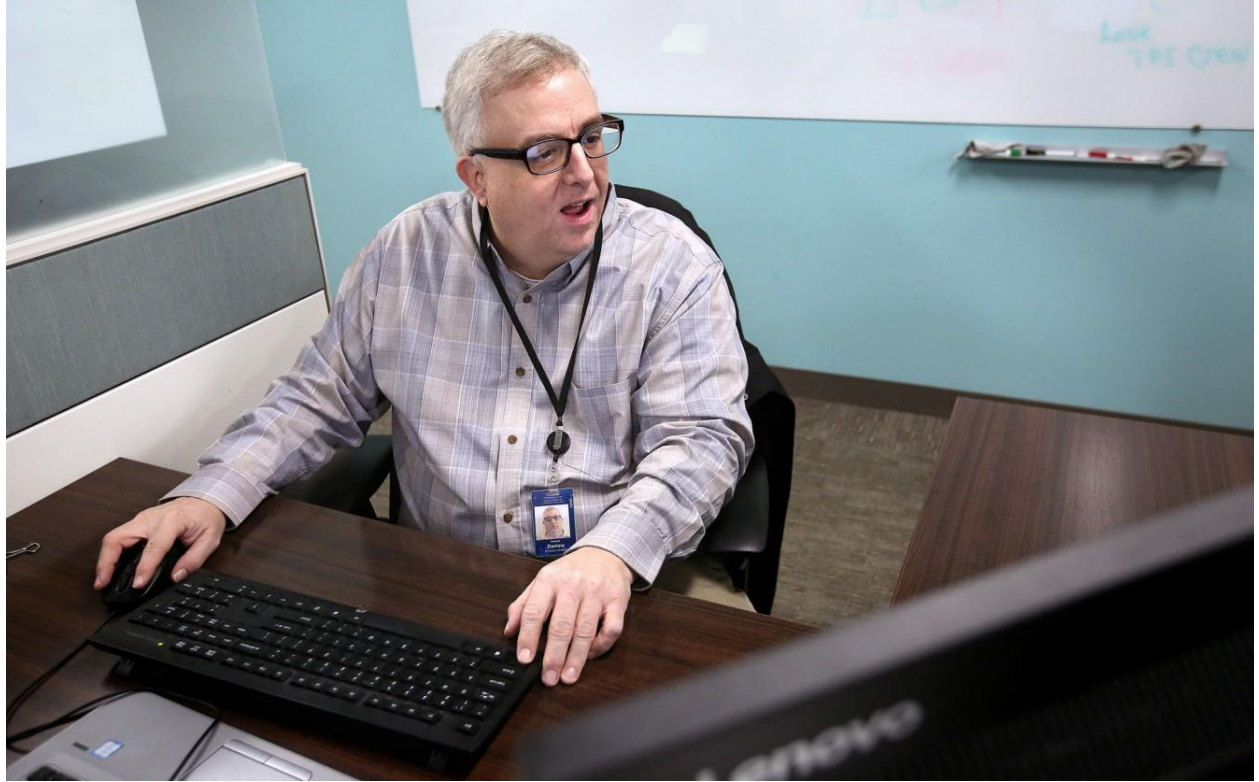


Workers With Autism Excel Through New Program That Is Model For Others

by Teresa Dixon Murray, The Plain Dealer/TNS | February 4, 2020



Bob Darrow, 47, has worked at KeyBank since June as a data analyst. Darrow was hired through help from The Precisionists, a company in Delaware which partners with companies to employ individuals with disabilities, especially autism. (Lisa DeJong/The Plain Dealer/TNS)

CLEVELAND — Bob Darrow started as a data analyst at KeyBank in Brooklyn last summer. A numbers guru, he sifts through data for KeyBank's loan services operations and creates spreadsheets for others on his team.

At 47, he hadn't held a full-time job in more than 20 years.

Darrow has autism. And he is an absolute rock star at KeyBank, his bosses say. He's better at some parts of his job than a computer would be. A graduate of Cleveland State University, Darrow for years has drifted in and out of jobs, many of them below his skill level. His previous job was stocking shelves. Before that, he did document imaging.

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He loves his position at KeyBank. "It's really cool," he said. "I'm in the game. This was such a godsend."

Darrow was hired through a new partnership between KeyBank and The Precisionists, a 3-1/2-year-old venture aimed at recruiting people who have various disabilities and matching them with jobs at companies nationwide such as Pfizer, UBS, Exelon Energy and Vanderbilt University.

The Precisionists, based in Delaware, assesses prospective employees and trains them for jobs that match their skills. Roughly two-thirds are hired and placed on a contract basis with companies; the rest aren't ready for employment just yet.

So far, eight people have worked at KeyBank through the partnership, in positions such as anti-money-laundering, fraud detection, data entry, analysis and the mailroom. All have autism. Three more are coming on board in the next couple of weeks.

Michael O'Boyle, a senior vice president at KeyBank, noted studies show the brain of a person with autism processes 42 percent more information than a neuro-typical one. And frankly, people with autism tend to be better at many tasks than traditional employees.

"This isn't just a feel-good story. It's delivering results," O'Boyle said. "It's mission and margin."

Many people with autism offer skills that are highly desired, such as the ability to focus and not get distracted, said Evan Taylor, a project manager for The Precisionists who works on-site at KeyBank.

Indeed, for some people with autism, the issues that often represent challenges for them are actually assets to employers.

At KeyBank, workers with autism tend to excel at repetitive tasks and they're detail-oriented, O'Boyle said. They're fantastic at detecting money-laundering patterns, for example. They also demonstrate accuracy, honesty, reliability and perseverance, he said.

Most employers don't realize what they're missing by not reaching out to people with disabilities, said Patricia Otter, president of the nonprofit UCP of Greater Cleveland, which works with people who receive disability benefits. "It's the disability that is their strength," Otter said.

Ernie Dianastasis, CEO of The Precisionists, founded the company in mid-2016 after his IT services company hired a handful of people with autism to do software development and testing. The results were amazing, he said. The newly hired workers had a great work ethic, they were loyal and they were precise. Thus the precisionists. "It was off the charts. That's when the light bulb went off," he said.

Dianastasis said many people with autism have plenty of ability, but may not do well in a job interview. "This is not a group that is going to make small talk. Or they may sit there and fidget or may not look you in the eye."

Taylor Trovato, 27, feels like her job in data entry at KeyBank is perfect for her. In addition to data entry, she sorts and scans mail. When an item gets returned to KeyBank because of an incorrect address or error, it's her responsibility to solve the issue and update the data.

Like Darrow, she's worked in other jobs before. But they either were only part-time or weren't challenging enough. "I've always wanted to do office work," said Trovato, of Seven Hills. "I love it here."

Workers earn market-competitive wages. The workers at KeyBank are technically employed by The Precisionists and are contracted out to KeyBank.

The Precisionists now has hubs in Philadelphia, Nashville and Phoenix and is considering opening one in Cleveland if it believes there's enough demand now that KeyBank is on board. At a hub office, people could apply to be assessed, evaluated and trained for jobs at various companies, perhaps large employers such as Sherwin-Williams, Progressive and Eaton, Dianastasis said. O'Boyle said many employers like KeyBank today find there's a shortage of good workers with the skills they need.

Dianastasis cites studies that 75 percent of people with autism are unemployed or underemployed, which is such a waste, he said. "You just need to understand where people's strengths are," he said. For example, workers with autism tend to thrive at software coding, pattern recognition and repetitive tasks.

"There is not a shred of charity in this model," Dianastasis said, adding that his employees are "as good as or better than other employees ... The program would never be sustainable if the performance wasn't there."

At UCP of Greater Cleveland, which helps place people with disabilities at local employers, Otter said she believes The Precisionists is the first private company operating locally with this business model. And she hopes The Precisionists can find more opportunities locally.

Each year, her agency places about 125 people with various developmental, physical, behavioral and intellectual challenges. UCP clients get referred because they receive disability benefits. UCP assesses them, trains them and helps them apply for jobs and prepare for interviews.

But there are probably several thousand local residents with disabilities who could work and need jobs, said Paul Soprano, director of adult services at UCP. “There’s a huge untapped labor pool out there,” he said.

Otter said employers may not turn to UCP or other agencies because they don’t realize its services are a free way to find good employees.

So far, most of The Precisionists’ employees have autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or obsessive-compulsive disorder. The company also is starting to recruit veterans with disabilities and people with hearing or vision issues. Its goal is to create 10,000 jobs for people with disabilities by 2025. Currently, it employs about 110 people with disabilities, plus about 25 in leadership.

Soprano at UCP said everyone wins when companies hire people with disabilities. Companies get productive employees, workers feel fulfilled and society benefits too. He said people placed by UCP contributed \$1.5 million in wages in the community.

O’Boyle said KeyBank may offer some permanent positions with benefits to some of the current Precisionists contractors. And the company will look to place Precisionists workers in other departments, such as technology and operations, risk and consumer banking. “Essentially we are looking for areas that require laser focus and repeatable tasks,” he said.

There are plenty of people around Cleveland who could fill those positions, said Sally Farwell, president and CEO of Achievement Centers for Children in Highland Hills, which works with children and adults with various physical and developmental disabilities.

“There are a whole lot of individuals sitting at home who want to do meaningful work,” Farwell said.

She added that partnerships like the one between KeyBank and The Precisionists are preparing the workplace for disability diversity. Employers could discover a whole new labor pool out there, she said.

For its part, KeyBank is thankful for the partnership and hopes to be a model other Cleveland-area companies could follow, O’Boyle said. “Key is changing lives with this program.”

<https://www.disabilitycoop.com/2020/02/04/workers-autism-excel-program-model-others/27760/>