

BUSINESS LIFE



The rare talents of autistic employees

WORKING LIVES

Emma
Jacobs



IT companies are keen to hire staff with the condition. A consultancy is filling the gap, writes Emma Jacobs

Three young men are in a small office in the City of London, listening to a coach talk about dealing with stress. These are not burnt-out lawyers or bankers, but wannabe tech contractors. Their autism and coding skills have brought them to the London offices of Auticon, a German consultancy that specialises in placing people on the autism spectrum in work, in entry-level or highly skilled jobs in a range of technology specialisms.

Tom Cowley, a 29-year-old who stands at 6ft 5in, with bushy curly hair and a beard, is one of the trio. After studying for a degree in games design, he has found himself in the catch-22 position of wanting to work at a games company but not landing opportunities because he lacks experience. Mr Cowley says he currently feels like a “tool without a purpose”.

He hopes that with Auticon’s help – support from a coach, a contract and an understanding employer – his self-esteem will improve. In the long term it may enable him to move out of his parents’ home in west London.

Auticon is one of a few consultancies – others include the Belgian Passwerk

and Specialisterne, founded in Denmark but now with operations across Europe and the US – that place autistic people in IT companies.

Mr Cowley’s difficulties are far from unusual. Autistic people can experience problems finding and staying in work, often due to misunderstandings related to their condition, or a lack of support. The complex neurodevelopment disorder can cause social, communication and behavioural difficulties.

Autism affects people in different ways: some might not be able to speak but others will be highly articulate, for example. Mr Cowley thinks he can occasionally come across as “a bit rude”.

But autistic people also sometimes have extraordinary talents, according to Auticon. Many are able to recognise patterns or mistakes in large amounts of data, are good at logical thinking, innovative problem-solving and offering fresh perspectives. They are often precise, good at concentration and perseverance – as well as autodidacticism.

In the UK, according to one 2010 survey, 26 per cent of graduates with autism were unemployed six months after completing their course – a proportion almost three times higher than non-disabled graduates. Phil Evans, an autism advocate and speaker who is looking for work, says interviewers have found him “robotic” – meaning they overlook his skills and degree.

The condition affects a high portion of the population. In the US, according to

the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, one in 68 children are autistic, increasing to one in 42 for boys. Some suggest the figure may be higher. One 2011 study by Autism Speaks, a US advocacy group, which looked at the entire population of school-age children in South Korea, found the figure to be one in 38 children.

Dirk Müller-Remus, Auticon’s founder, is a software developer whose son Ricardo was diagnosed with Asperger syndrome – a form of autism – at the age of 14 in 2007.

“His difficulties in social interaction and communication... became more and more obvious,” he says.

A year later Mr Müller-Remus and his wife attended a talk at which 25 people with autism, most of whom were highly educated, spoke about their struggles to find work. All were unemployed. Mr Müller-Remus was shocked, and he resolved to start a company to focus on the strengths of technically skilled people with autism.

Martin Neumann has been working as a consultant for Auticon in Germany for the past four years. He used to own a civil engineering planning company with a friend. He took care of the technical expertise while his co-founder was the public face of the business, in charge of communicating with customers and networking. This worked well until his partner became ill and Mr Neumann had to take on his responsibilities.

“I couldn’t do it. The stress wore me down,” says Mr Neumann. It led to burnout, and in turn a visit to the doctor, who diagnosed Mr Neumann as being on the spectrum. The 55-year-old had felt for his entire life that “either I was the outsider or others were”.

Soon after, Mr Neumann came across Auticon. His programming skills mean he is in high demand.

It helps that a coach briefs new colleagues on his needs. “Neuro-typicals”,

‘Like a different language’: Martin Neumann disliked the public side of running his own business; now he is a consultant, enjoying high demand for his programming skills — Marco Urban

a neologism used in the autistic community as a label for people not on the spectrum, need to “check how your day was”, says Mr Neumann. “I don’t need to. I find it stressful. It’s like a third or fourth language. I don’t quite understand it.”

Emma Jones, partnerships and employment training co-ordinator at the National Autistic Society, says some employers make assumptions based on partial knowledge of the condition.

Some autistic staff may want to work alone in a cubicle, while others may find solitary work lonely, for example. She recalls one autistic woman who was moved from the job she loved to the finance department after an autism diagnosis, because it was assumed that she would be good at figures. “She hated maths,” says Ms Jones.

Viola Sommer, head of operations at Auticon, says hiring staff with autism can boost a business. Some of their autistic consultants’ brutal honesty has ruffled feathers. But, if such honesty means pointing out that a project is likely to fail when other staff may be reluctant to voice doubts, it can ultimately be good for business.

“Managers often don’t want to hear the truth,” she says.

“We try to turn it round and say that autism is an advantage,” says Kurt Schöffner, Auticon’s chief executive.

Meanwhile, Miles Findlay, a smartly dressed 22-year-old, has found the coaching briefing from Auticon helpful. Before the training sessions in the City of London, the computer science student was worried about entering the workplace. He has experienced something of an epiphany, realising he has unique assets and skills. “I have skills and don’t need to worry about the condition,” he says.

emma.jacobs@ft.com
Twitter: @emmaj

Autistic consultants’ brutal honesty has ruffled feathers – but it can be good for business