



PHOTO COURTESY OF CINCINNATI CHILDREN'S HOSPITAL MEDICAL CENTER

As a 16-year employee with autism, Eric Johnson, 34, brings many positive, productive attributes to his job stocking medicine cabinets in the emergency room department at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center.

# 'Diversity of Thought'

**Individuals with autism can prove to be model employees, if supervisory techniques are adjusted. In fact, some companies are going out of their way to hire them because of their unique and often productive ways of doing certain types of work.**

BY CAROL PATTON

Every day, 34-year-old Eric Johnson stocks 58 different medicine cabinets in the emergency room department at Cincinnati Children's Hospital Medical Center. He fills them with a wide variety of supplies, ranging from tongue depressors and gloves to alcohol swabs. He arrives on time every day, makes few, if any errors, and is rarely absent.

Most companies would be lucky to have him as an employee. Yet, some would never consider hiring him because of his disability: Johnson has autism.

Although hard numbers are not available, the National Institutes of Health estimates that one out of every 88 children in the United States has autism and that 36,500 of every 4 million children are born each year with the developmental disorder, which affects a person's ability to communicate and interact with others.

Such individuals represent a willing and able workforce that is largely ignored, unemployed or underemployed. However, that is slowly changing. CCHMC and other employers are beginning to focus on what workplace tasks such individuals can—instead of can't—perform.

Employer outcomes tell the real story. For those taking these workers on, production often rises because workers with autism can focus for long periods of time on repetitive tasks. Employee engagement tends to improve because their co-workers appreciate the value of empowering individuals with autism. Even employee retention increases because those with autism rarely quit their jobs. Even employee retention increases, according to companies that employ them. Individuals with autism rarely quit because jobs are hard to find and many are uncomfortable with change.

Johnson, for example, has held his position at CCHMC for 16 years. Other hospital employees with the disorder have held different jobs for many years such as scheduling patient appointments, transporting patients or doing clerical work in accounting, says Erin Riehle, director of disability services at the medical center who also founded Project Search, a school-to-work program for disabled individuals that supports sites throughout the United States and United Kingdom.

Of the 60 disabled employees the hospital has hired over the years, he says, approximately 18 percent have autism, and many of them excel at complex but routine jobs.

"Everyone thinks they can only work cleaning off tables or in a socially-isolated setting," Riehle says. "People on the autism spectrum come with an incredible variety of talent and skills. It's really about seeing what they excel at ... helping them gain the skills they need and teaching people in businesses how to react to them appropriately."

He says HR has been "incredibly supportive" of Project Search. It assigned a staff person to the program; changed the criteria for some jobs from high-school degree to high-school degree or equivalent; adapted annual training programs, such as using pictures rather than a manual to describe a process; actively promotes Project Search to department heads and engages in job-carving, or deleting noncritical tasks from a job's description. Most of the time, however, job responsibilities remain intact, says Riehle. Employees with autism are given a chance to realize their full potential.

## Natural Fit

People with autism observe the same set of company policies or rules as everyone else and are treated the same by managers. The only differences may involve job interviews, training or minimal job accommodations.

SAP, for example, learned the value of training workers with autism for six months before onboarding them, says Anka Wittenberg, chief diversity and inclusion officer at the Walldorf, Germany-based software company.

It recently partnered with Specialisterne, a Danish company that plans to create 1 million jobs worldwide

## 3-Part Disability Series

**September 16, 2013**

**Part I – 'Diversity of Thought': Valuing the Strengths of Autistic Workers**

**November 2013**

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for people with autism. Wittenberg says Specialisterne is helping SAP employ people with autism by teaching them expected workplace behaviors such as proper work attire, since most never held a job.

Processes vary by country, however. In Denmark, for example, the government pays Specialisterne to train viable candidates who also receive a training stipend. SAP is working with Specialisterne to establish similar arrangements in other countries.

SAP's introduction to the world of autism began two years ago. According to Wittenberg, several employees in its Bangalore, India, office helped people with autism use iPads—supplied by SAP—as a communication tool. SAP developers then worked side-by-side with them to develop a communication app that shows pictures of objects, then has someone speaking the name of the object out loud.

The innate technical abilities of autistic workers became apparent, she says. SAP hired five of them to serve on the software-testing team, which consisted of 38 people, and assigned each a buddy.

“We realized there was a positive impact on the team,” Wittenberg says, adding that her observations are based on employee feedback. “Employee engagement went up among the team and the productivity of the team was extremely high. Employees said, ‘Not only do we like our work, but we really like the impact we have on other people’s lives.’”

Now, other managers are stepping forward, eager to supervise people with autism. To ensure successful work experiences, SAP offers mandatory awareness training for nearly 50 managers who are supervising such individuals and information sessions about autism for all employees.

This pilot program now operates in four additional countries—Ireland, Germany, Canada and the United States; more specifically, SAP's lab in Palo Alto, Calif. By the end of the year, Wittenberg says, more than 40 people with autism will be serving as software testers, programmers and data-quality-assurance specialists.

Meanwhile, she hopes to apply lessons learned toward other diversity projects. For example, during the past several years, she says, female employees were trained to negotiate and communicate like men, and even use the same body language. Not anymore. This project helped HR better understand the need to increase “gender intelligence” and create an inclusive environment, she says.

“Our goals are to develop people with autism, allow the uniqueness of that individual at the table,” Wittenberg says. “We have to rethink the way we recruit. We really have to focus on the abilities, not disabilities, people bring to the table.”

Last year, Freddie Mac began hiring people with autism for 16-week

internships, says Stephanie Roemer, diversity recruiting and learning manager at the federal home-loan mortgage corporation in McLean, Va.

“We hired four interns in 2012 and we are on schedule to hire four more this year,” Roemer says. One job, for example, requires an employee to understand technical code while

another involves transferring paper files into electronic files. “We’re seeking candidates for our finance division and also for our single-family division.”

As the organization’s only formal disability program, it targets adults with autism who have earned college degrees in computer science, mathematics or financial engineering.

During interviews, Roemer says, they are given a tour of the facility and their workspace, which reduces their anxiety related to new experiences.

Candidates are also asked about accommodations. Some individuals, for example, received an advance copy of the interview questions, were sensitive to fluorescent light and interviewed in

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rooms with natural light, or placed in cubicles in a quieter part of the building due to their sensitivity to noise.

This year, the organization is hosting training sessions for all team members. A panel of adults with autism, formed by Freddie Mac's partner—the Autistic Self Advocacy Network—will also discuss its own work experiences, says Roemer.

Unfortunately, she says, no interns have been hired due to lack of open positions. But when a job does become available, she's not opposed to job-carving or adjusting the responsibilities. Likewise, the company formed an employee-abilities-network group earlier this year. Although not all members are disabled, some will volunteer

as mentors for the interns and their managers.

So far, there have been zero performance issues. In some cases, interns completed their tasks so quickly that their managers ran out of work for them.

Roemer thinks the program will help her company remain competitive.

"Diversity of thought is what's going to make us competitive, help our workforce, [help us] succeed and remain sustainable in the future," she says.

### Unexpected Outcomes

Employers nationwide have voiced their concerns about a shortage of skilled applicants. However, many individuals with autism can demonstrate excellent skills in a variety of areas when given a chance, says Marcia Scheiner, president and founder of New York-based Asperger Syndrome Training and Employment Partnership, which helps college graduates with autism obtain professional positions.

Scheiner believes hiring them is simply good business. Many are incredibly loyal, tend not to leave their job, are detail-oriented and can be tremendously focused, which often leads to high productivity. Managers only need to adjust their supervisory style.

"Many individuals on the spectrum do much better with written instructions," Scheiner says, adding that they can also email their boss a detailed list of their tasks to verify their understanding of assignments. "They need clear, direct instructions. No use of idioms or colloquial language."

More than likely, managers will also need to schedule routine meetings to help them prioritize tasks and understand expectations of each project or assignment. They'll also need to notify them of upcoming changes and set clear rules around social-workplace behavior.



**"Many individuals [with autism] do much better with written instructions."**

—MARCIA SCHEINER,  
ASPERGER SYNDROME  
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These practices are simply good management for any employee, Scheiner says.

Over the past decade, Walgreens has been proactive in employing individuals with autism and other disabilities at two of its distribution centers, and has conducted more than 200 company tours to showcase how it adapts training to accommodate people with autism and other disabilities.

“The nature of our distribution centers is such that you’re talking about highly time-sensitive, systemized environments,” says Steve Pemberton, chief diversity officer at Walgreens, which has 240,000 employees nationwide. “There are degrees of autism,” each with its own optimal work environment.

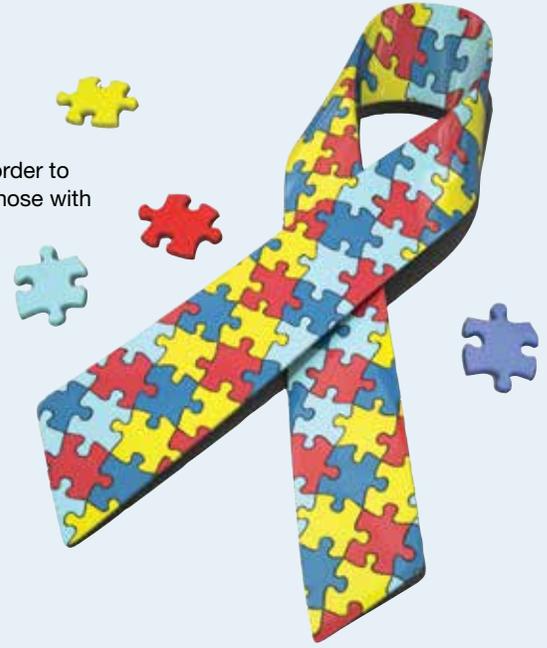
Pemberton says the company’s standards for job performance and pay have never been lowered or compromised to accommodate the hiring focus. The only changes have involved training.

For example, the Walgreen’s partners assign a job coach to new employees to help them through the onboarding process. And, instead of handing out a training manual, he says, HR provides visual aids that illustrate job responsibilities, which

## Behavioral Clues

**N**ot every employee with autism self-discloses or can be easily identified. Those with Asperger’s syndrome, for instance, tend to be high-functioning and highly verbal. Still, supervisors need to be aware of those with the disorder to appropriately manage them. Here are some common symptoms those with autism might experience:

- Has trouble socializing with colleagues;
- Has difficulty prioritizing tasks or becoming easily flustered when changing projects;
- Is focused on just one aspect of a project, but uninterested in everything else;
- Takes everything at face value, is “literal-minded”;
- Can be inflexible;
- May be sensitive to light, sounds and smells;
- Has difficulty establishing eye contact; and
- Has facial recognition problems, may not remember colleagues’ names.



Source: Marcia Scheiner, Asperger Syndrome Training and Employment Partnership, New York

are sometimes posted around an employee’s workstation.

The retention rate of this niche workforce is probably what has caught the attention of some employers. Over a three-year period, Pemberton says employee turnover at its distribution facilities in South Carolina and Connecticut was 48 percent less

among those with autism than its overall employee population. Equally impressive, he says, absenteeism and mistakes were very low.

“Our ability to retain this population is, for us, the ultimate measure of how well we’re doing,” says Pemberton, adding that many companies—including Best Buy and The Hershey Co.—

follow Walgreen’s model of employing people with autism, making training accommodations, and using job coaches and training aids. “[Promoting people with autism],” he says, “creates the ultimate environment for production standards.”

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# FYI

## Disability Divide

**R**ecent research finds that, despite sharing some common ground, employers and employees have differing perceptions of the likelihood and impact of an income-threatening disability.

The Portland, Maine-based Council for Disability Awareness’ 2013 *Disability Divide: Employer Study* found 53 percent of 553 HR professionals indicate their employees “had never really thought about preparing for disability,” with only 26 percent saying their employees are “prepared to withstand a disability that causes them to lose their income.”

The survey also found 84 percent of HR professionals reporting that most disabled workers would return to work within six months. Among the 1,006 employees polled, however, 68 percent said disability would keep someone out of work for a year or longer, with 31 percent saying a disabled employee would never return to work. Forty-eight percent of employees said they didn’t have enough information about purchasing disability insurance. Nearly three-quarters of HR professionals (72 percent) indicated it was their responsibility to help employees understand their benefits, but only 57 percent said they should provide direction or recommendations on choosing benefits.

## DOJ Settles Employment Service’s ADA Violations

**T**he United States Department of Justice has entered into an interim settlement agreement with the state of Rhode Island and the city of Providence, R.I., to resolve violations of the Americans with Disabilities Act for approximately 200 Rhode Islanders with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

An initial investigation launched by the U.S. Department of Labor’s wage and hour division revealed improper sub-minimum wages being paid to people with disabilities working at Training Thru Placement Inc., a North Providence, R.I.-based employment-service provider. The DOJ subsequently found approximately 90 workers with disabilities at TTP were not in the most integrated work setting appropriate for them, determining that people with disabilities at TTP were capable of working in real jobs with supports and participating in activities. Since the DOJ’s investigation began earlier this year, the state of Rhode Island has stopped providing services or funding for new participants at TTP’s sheltered workshop and facility-based day program.

## Study: Autistic Workers Successful with Training

**A** new study finds young people with autism can be highly successful on the job when offered intensive and specialized training.

Researchers from Virginia Commonwealth University and the Virginia Autism Resource Center followed a group of 40 high-school students with autism, Asperger’s syndrome or pervasive developmental disorder. Some students received traditional special-education offerings while others were provided specialized training and internships through a program called “Project SEARCH with Autism Supports.” In their report, *Competitive Employment for Youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders: Early Results from a Randomized Clinical Trial*, researchers found 87 percent of the students receiving the extra job training found work in competitive employment situations after graduation, compared to just 6 percent of students in the control group.

Students in the program did internships at two different hospitals, working in neonatal and pediatric intensive-care units, diabetic wellness units and hospital pharmacies, for example. According to the researchers, all of the work was high-level, but involved repetitive tasks requiring attention to detail.

## Substance Abuse a Disability?

**A** recently filed federal lawsuit accuses Wal-Mart of using a former pharmacist’s substance-abuse disorder as cause to fire him, *The Oregonian* reports.

In *David Shane Doran v. Wal-Mart Stores Inc.*, Doran alleges the company violated the Americans with Disabilities Act when it terminated him in 2011, citing his inability to perform his job, “about one month after referring to Mr. Doran as a ‘great pharmacist with a wealth of knowledge.’” The suit also says Doran was diagnosed with substance-abuse disorder in 2007, the same year he was hired to work in the pharmacy at a Wal-Mart location in Medford, Ore. According to the company, Doran was let go after the Bentonville, Ark.-based retailer implemented a credentialing program for pharmacists in 2011.

“Pharmacists whose record[s] with the state pharmacy board showed disciplinary action had been taken against them for inappropriate conduct ... were no longer eligible to work for us,” said Wal-Mart spokesman Dan Fogleman in a statement.

Doran was fired from another pharmacy in early 2007, for what the lawsuit describes as “conduct related to addiction.” He voluntarily stopped practicing, reported his conduct to the state’s board of pharmacy and entered a 30-day in-house treatment program. In June 2007, he was granted a probationary license to practice, and was required to enter a five-year recovery program. According to the suit, Doran passed all subsequent drug tests, and he claims he was never disciplined, got regular raises and was consistently rated in job evaluations as an excellent performer during his time at Wal-Mart.