



The neurodiversity movement

centers around autism but encompasses many other conditions. By overlooking neurodiverse talent, organizations miss a powerful opportunity to tap into unique perspectives that can fuel problem solving, innovation and growth.

How to hire and retain neurodivergent candidates to help bridge the talent gap

Neurodiverse Talent Brings New Perspectives to Manufacturing

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By 2030, U.S. manufacturing is expected to have 2.1 million unfilled jobs with a resulting significant economic impact, according to a 2021 study by Deloitte. At the same time, there is a large population of people classified as neurodivergent who want to work but can't find jobs or sustain employment.

According to the report "Neurodiversity: the Little Known Superpower," published by the Korn Ferry Institute, the term "neurodiversity" commonly refers to autism, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and neurologically correlated clinical conditions.

The report explains that "neurodivergent people see, feel and experience the world differently as a result of atypical brain function. This means they approach the world's problems—and its solutions—from unconventional angles." For manufacturing, that untapped superpower could be critical in bridging the talent gap.

Understanding the Spectrum of Potential

About one in 36 children has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, according to the CDC, and

15% of the population is considered neurodiverse, according to neurodiversity.guru. Neurodivergent individuals are often skilled in analyzing data, problem-solving, pattern recognition and attention to detail. In short, they bring a lot to the table.

"It's not about charity," explains Monica Jackson, who has held senior leadership roles in diversity, equity and inclusion at Eaton, GE Aviation and, as of September, Cargill. "There are pools of talent out there that desire to work and be gainfully employed," she adds. "This is to meet our labor needs. We need individuals who have the skill and ability to perform. There are jobs they can excel at without typecasting or stereotyping."

Fostering a workplace that supports neurodiversity inclusion can promote creativity, innovation and productivity, explains Sarah Loucks, global lead for software giant SAP's 10-year-old autism inclusion initiative, Autism at Work. "Each individual is unique and care should be taken to avoid stereotypes. Individuals on the autism spectrum may be clear communicators who communicate in a direct and precise manner. When performing work aligned with interests, dedication and focus may be a strength."

Since SAP launched its Autism at Work program in 2013, Loucks says, a handful of other large companies have followed that lead, which now includes regular corporate sharing through the Neurodiversity@Work Employer Roundtable. SAP shares its experiences with fellow employers via the SAP Autism Inclusion Pledge, which provides complimentary resources.

Positive Results

JPMorgan Chase's Autism at Work program has found that, with careful job matching, people on the autism spectrum can be 90% to 140% more productive than employees who had been there five to 10 years, according to a leadership piece in *Quartz* magazine.



Elizabeth Plouffe is the founder of Spero Careers Canada, an organization that works to place people on the autism spectrum in manufacturing jobs.

Loucks explains that SAP employees have access, if they wish, to an autism buddy on their team, a mentor and a coach, as well as SAP's autism employee network group, the Autism Inclusion Network. SAP also works with outside organizations, first to recruit people on the autism spectrum and then to help ensure their success on the job.

Brian Rice, SAP's VP of digital experiences, speaks

from firsthand experience. Rice, 43, has been at SAP for 13 years. He discovered he was on the autism spectrum after his two sons were identified as autistic. At that time, he had already been with SAP for several years.

"I was diagnosed later in life," Rice says. "It was such an eye-opening experience. It improved my relationship with my wife and children as I struggle with similar behaviors as my children—sensory issues, being overwhelmed with transitions and communication," Rice adds. "It made me feel complete. I decided this was something I wanted to be open about at work to be an advocate for myself and others on the spectrum."

Rice explains that finding a common ground and positioning people in roles where they are going to succeed is what companies should do. "That's not just about one pool of workers. This is what we should all be striving for. We all benefit from more thoughtfulness."

This isn't just lip service. According to Loucks, one of SAP's more than 215 employees on the autism spectrum devised a solution that reduced the processing time for mass invoices from several days to 20 minutes.

The Right Environment

Although neurodiverse people present many strengths, they may need a modified work environment to realize their full potential. Most work environments were created without the neurodiverse population in mind. Some helpful accommodations generally cost less than a one-time \$500 fee. Some are free. This is according to Elizabeth Plouffe, founder, Spero Careers Canada, which works to place people on the autism spectrum in manufacturing jobs. For example, vests can be used to help neurodivergent people navigate the work environment in which each employee wears a certain color depending on where they are in the workplace matrix—new hires get one color, supervisors another color and managers another color, Plouffe explains.

New employees know who to go to if they have a question and other employees could easily identify someone they might need to provide support to, according to Spero's July 2022 white paper, "The Autism Talent Pool," which was developed in partnership with the Work Based Learning Consortium. "Managers could identify new hires as well as the lead hand, supervisor or floor manager they might need to communicate with. The employer shared that this helped with communica-

tion, performance and production.”

Spero Careers Canada started a program in 2020 with more than 50 companies who confirmed they would like to learn more about hiring neurodivergent talent and 25 candidates who indicated interest in this type of career. This has led to a second program directly connecting neurodivergent candidates to interviews with employers. The employers undergo neurodiversity and inclusion training as part of this government-funded initiative.

Eaton’s efforts have been underway since the early 2000s, with a formalized inclusion and diversity program launched in 2011, Jackson says. Eaton has a number of inclusion employee resource groups, including enAble for employees who are neurodivergent, disabled, caregivers of those with special needs or their allies. Eaton partners with nonprofits to help identify and recruit neurodiverse employees, Jackson adds.

At Eaton, some of the first intentional neurodiversity hires were for IT, notably in software development, software testing and cybersecurity, according to Jackson. The needs within IT often match the strengths neurodiverse people have, such as attention to detail, pattern recognition, accuracy and precision, she explains. Overall, staff at Eaton come from unusually diverse demographic backgrounds; the company is comprised of 30.9% females and 37.4% ethnic minorities, according to job search platform Zippia.

Spero’s white paper, based on a year of exploring the autism community’s interest in working in advanced manufacturing in Ontario, showed that 16% of participants met or exceeded the competency requirements to succeed in roles in advanced manufacturing. And more than 80% showed interest in careers in advanced manufacturing, with 30% making changes to their career path.

“Employers acknowledged they were excellent employees who stayed on task with little if any accommodations to do the job required,” the white paper stated. “When asked if they would hire another autistic employee, the answer was yes, with no hesitation.”

More than 50 employers were interviewed and indicated that neurodiverse people typically offer these benefits: attention to detail, the ability to work with little supervision, comfort with repetitive tasks, honesty, loyalty, appreciation for structure, success

within roles requiring physical exertion and low-absenteeism rates combined with a desire to deliver a high quality of service, the white paper asserted.

Adjusting the Interview Process

When interviewing candidates on the autism spectrum, experts advise not relying on the open-ended questions or prompts such as “Tell me about yourself.” Instead, let job candidates show you, not tell you, what they can do—whether you’re talking about an Excel spreadsheet or a welding torch, says Paulette Goddard, partner at Spero Careers Canada. Such a demonstration is better for employers too, Plouffe explains, citing a neurotypical prospective candidate who assured an interviewer that he knew how to weld—but what he actually knew how to do was solder.

“The selection process needs to be different in



Sarah Loucks is global lead for SAP’s autism inclusion initiative Autism at Work.

some ways,” Jackson affirms. “You may get less eye contact than with someone else. In traditional interviews, people say, ‘They made such great eye contact.’ We have to be more astute at assessing talent. You could be ruling out a huge population of talent if you use those traditional assessment techniques and standards.” Instead, Jackson says, give candidates a specific task and see how they perform.

Use simple language instead of industry buzz words and jargon, Rice adds, which is an approach

that benefits all candidates. If a question has several parts, let the job candidate know that before beginning, he explains.

Other accommodations could include conducting the interview in a quiet place with no distractions and



Brian Rice is SAP's vice president of digital experiences. He found out he was on the autism spectrum after his two sons were identified as autistic.

making sure others know not to disturb; providing interview questions and discussion topics in advance; building in a tour of the workplace including accessible areas, the shop floor and break rooms; and understanding that a pause before answering is the candidate composing an answer.

Going Beyond the Hiring Process

Neurodiversity inclusion doesn't end when a prospective employee becomes a new hire.

"Often these sorts of initiatives are referred to as hiring programs, which is a limited view," Loucks says. "Hiring is obviously an important component. Beyond that, we want to be supporting our people throughout their careers at SAP."

Rice concurs. "If you hired them but didn't provide ongoing support, you run the risk of disenfranchising them along the way. Everyone wants to feel a place of

belonging, feel their authentic self, feel heard and seen. Having that platform to provide support and awareness helps build trust."

For example, SAP worked with its global employee assistance (mental health) provider to make sure counselors and therapists were aware that the company has an autism inclusion initiative and that the program is available for all employees, including those already at the company when the programs began, Loucks says.

Rice's personal examples of being open include telling his bosses, coworkers and those he supervises that he struggles with eye contact, especially during video meetings; communicating that it's helpful for him to check out a restaurant in advance to determine if there will be food he can eat; and asking for more time when traveling to adjust to new environments.

Accommodations on the Shop Floor

Along with rules and safety protocols, Plouffe says managers should present the consequences of failing to comply—including extreme cases, such as losing a finger. These kinds of conversations benefit all workers, not just neurodivergent employees.

"That creates buy-in for anybody," Plouffe adds. "The old industrial mindset of, 'Do it because I say so,' is no longer a thing. All employees have a right to know what could happen. Yelling and using fear tactics doesn't motivate anyone to do better."

According to Goddard, autistic individuals can be kinesthetic learners and prefer to have an active job. "If you give them all the safety rules and protocols, they follow them."

During the workday, managers should strive to be very clear about expectations, as well as the goal for each task and the completed job, Jackson says. Managers may need to exercise more patience while employees grasp critical concepts, she adds.

On the job, managers can:

- Allow noise-canceling headphones if safe, even if not required.
- Establish communication methods that work for the employee, such as providing written instructions.
- Provide checklists for job tasks.
- Create and use training content in verbal, written and video format.

- Schedule shifts consistently.
- Provide clear, regular and consistent feedback on performance.
- Give access to an employment coach or outside mentor.

“If they’ve messed up, take them aside,” Plouffe says.

“Never criticize anyone in front of their colleagues. Some managers’ attitude is, ‘If I’m not yelling at you, you’re doing a good job.’ Instead, set up regular feedback sessions with valid, authentic feedback, both positive and negative.”

These approaches, while excellent for neurodiverse people, also provide a better work environment for everyone, proponents say.

At a previous employer, a boss told Rice he did not get the promotion he sought because he wasn’t at his desk for an informal in-office happy hour every day. Instead, Rice was working through lunch so he could leave on time to take night classes to earn an MBA.

“Everyone wants to feel they have endless possibilities for growth—that the doors are not shut,” Rice says, adding that he feels accepted at SAP. “What I appreciate the most is the feeling of safety to disclose my diagnosis and feel whole.”

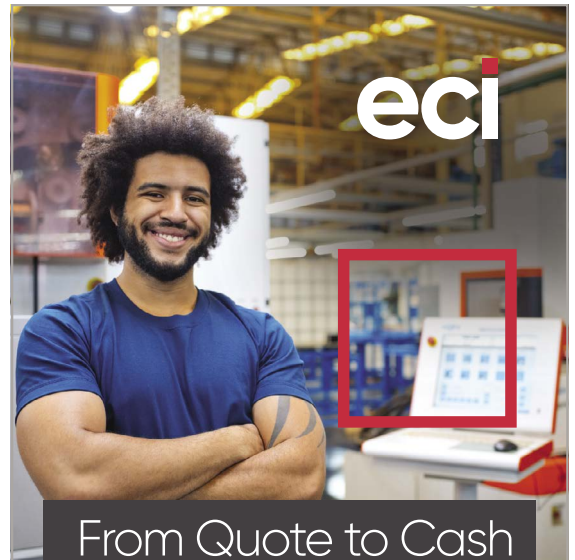
Allowing employees to feel whole is something that requires a holistic approach across a company, from leadership to the shop floor.

“I think of our efforts as less of a program, more of an integrated thing,” Jackson says.

“People realize, ‘Maybe I need to slow down, even for others, and think about what the individual needs.’ We all have unique needs, different needs and have to adjust accordingly.”

As manufacturers consider adopting an inclusion culture, they should involve people who are on the autism spectrum, connect with local neurodiversity advocacy organizations and learn from corporate peers who already have inclusive practices in place, Loucks advises.

“At the end of the day, we’re going to hire the best talent to do the job,” Jackson adds. “We need that in order to win in the marketplace. It’s a business imperative.”



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