

Tapping into the Neurodiverse Talent Pool

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Here's how employers can capitalize on a growing segment of the talent pool: autistic workers.

Definitions of employee diversity have begun expanding in the past few years to include people who are “neurodiverse,” most notably those on the autism spectrum, because they can offer high productivity, job loyalty and innovations from a different perspective.

Jumping right into hiring and onboarding this talent segment without educating HR and managers, developing an employee culture of acceptance, or creating a strong support system can set this talent segment up for failure, says Mike Civello, vice president and creator/director of the Neurodiversity Inclusion Center at Rethink, a New York-based online services company.

Calling HR the “culture drivers” and managers the “culture influencers,” Civello recommends first educating these groups about accommodating neurodiversity in the workplace to

“situate yourself as an employer of choice in what I believe is an amazing talent pool,” he says.

Rethink’s program includes e-learning videos and discussion guides, case studies from companies that have launched autism at work programs, and interviews with neurodiverse individuals about what has worked and what hasn’t worked for them in their careers.



The expertise stems from Rethink’s online services platform that supports employees who have children with special needs. Companies using this employee benefit service—which include SAP, Microsoft, Costco and others—have developed autism at work programs and have shared their best practices with NIC.

Broadening communication within the entire employee population comes next.

“If you are familiar with something, it becomes more comfortable,” he explains. Strategies include talking about famous people who are said to be on the neurodiversity spectrum and then conducting focus groups to elicit and share stories from employees themselves.

“Get your staff and culture introduced to folks with different types of disabilities, physical and intellectual, through a mall internship program and then transition those interns eventually into full-time employees,” says Civello, who recommends working with vocational specialists to identify and attract neurodiverse candidates.

Next, he says, is providing appropriate accommodations for the new hires. Noise-canceling headphones and workspace design can counteract the increased sensory sensitivity common with autism. On-the-job training and role-playing can help neurodiverse employees learn how to pick up on social cues and work more easily with other people, including customers.

NIC provides access to board-certified behavioral analysts who would guide managers and HR folks on how to identify the behavioral triggers that cause problems and help managers modify their own behaviors and/or train the employees to avoid future problems.

“Two years ago, I would walk into a room to do a talk about neurodiversity and maybe two people would raise their hands that they had even heard of the term,” Civello says. “Today, it’s a major topic at conferences and encompasses companies in every industry and every size.”