

## Diversity

# HIRING EMPLOYEES WITH AUTISM

As more people with autism enter the workforce, employers are tapping a new source of talent.

By Donna M. Owens

**O**n any given weekday at the Home Depot store in Downingtown, Pa., Maurice Baynard can be found hard at work.

Sometimes he's mixing paint or stocking shelves.

At other times, Baynard stays busy assisting customers, rounding up shopping carts in the parking lot and more.

"The job is great," says the 24-year-old facility support associate. He was hired five years ago thanks to Ken's Kids, a program that links workers with developmental disabilities to mainstream jobs. "I'm making a lot of good friends, and the people are very nice. I get along with them very well."

The professional and social connections that Baynard has made at work are noteworthy because he has been diagnosed as having "autistic-like behaviors."

Autism is a neurobiological disorder, typically characterized by challenges with communication and socialization. People with

autism often engage in repetitive behaviors, have restricted interests or both.

About 1.5 million people in the United States have some form of autism, according to the Autism Society of America. Most are under 18, and males outnumber females by four to one.

Data released in 2009 from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention show that one in 110 children has a disorder somewhere on the autism spectrum, and the numbers are growing.

"Popular culture and wider diagnostic tools have led to increased awareness of autism," says Patricia Wright, Ph.D., national director of autism services for Easter Seals, a Chicago-based nonprofit with a history of serving people with disabilities.

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*The author is a freelance writer in Baltimore.*



Maurice Baynard was hired at the Home Depot store in Downingtown, Pa., through a program that links workers with developmental disabilities to mainstream jobs.

Indeed, the spotlight on autism has grown thanks to books, HBO's movie on acclaimed livestock equipment engineer Temple Grandin and other media exposure.

Perhaps in response, more health care providers, disability advocates and others are pushing to improve community connections for individuals with autism.

This integration is critical in the workplace, say experts, where individuals with special needs can gain confidence, exert independence and improve their quality of life.

## Looking for Work

"There are many adults [with autism] out there looking for and trying to secure employment," says Wright, whose position was created three years ago to tackle autism issues.

"Despite the Americans with Disabilities Act, we're not quite there yet" in terms of hiring, she adds. "We know that

it can be more difficult for people with disabilities to get jobs," even when they have the same qualifications as people without disabilities.

While there's scant data about the number of people with autism in the workforce, recent data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reveal that less than 20 percent of Americans with disabilities are gainfully employed.

That said, recruiters for a growing number of companies are finding qualified candidates with autism via referrals from partner agencies, word-of-mouth recommendations and community outreach. In addition to using more-inclusive hiring practices, some companies are providing targeted training to managers and workers and implementing teaching and technology aids.

As part of the Kohl's KidsAbilities program, Children's Specialized Hospital and Kohl's Department Stores have teamed up to deliver a first-of-its-kind national program, Make Friends

with Autism, designed to educate businesses and the community about autism. The program, which features multimedia education materials in English and Spanish, emphasizes acceptance so people with autism can fully participate in the community.

Other employers, including CVS Caremark, Walgreens and The Home Depot, have taken their commitment to diversity a step further, by reaching out to people with autism as part of their overall staffing strategies.

## Creating Opportunities

Visit a Home Depot in Delaware, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Maryland, New Jersey and New York and you may encounter an enthusiastic worker who's one of Ken's Kids.

Founded in 1997, Ken's Kids Inc. provides vocational training and job placement for adults with developmental disabilities, many with autism. The goal is to help these individuals both sustain employment and become productive, successful members of society.

"About 200 young adults have come through and found jobs with our corporate partners," says Rebecca Malinsky, a licensed master social worker and executive director of the New York-based nonprofit.



Rebecca Malinsky

"This is not a charity case," she adds. "This is an opportunity for someone to get a job. Our workers are seen as an asset and a good business choice."

Ken's Kids is the brainchild of some visionary parents who were concerned that their children's developmental differences might marginalize them in the job market. The Home Depot co-founder Ken Langone heard about their

concerns and offered to provide employment opportunities at the Home Depot store in Philadelphia. His financial and other assistance helped the parents launch a pilot program, and the newly minted group was named in his honor.

Today, Ken's Kids has workers at more than 50 Home Depot stores. In 2008, The Home Depot Foundation announced a three-year, \$1 million grant to expand the program—a gift that Langone matched.

The organization receives federal and other support and gets high marks from the HR professionals who have signed on to its mission.

"The program is great for our stores because when customers see these young adults at work, they realize that we really are a family. ... They understand that we're employing people who might have had difficulty finding a position otherwise," says

Debbie Kiedeisch, a district HR manager for The Home Depot.

Kiedeisch, who has 26 years of HR experience, acts as a liaison between store management and program staff. The Home Depot's HR personnel are empowered to craft their own involvement at the store level; Kiedeisch handles workers' documentation and eligibility and places associates in the right store department, among other responsibilities.

Asked what's needed for such programs to be successful, she stresses: "You must have the support and buy-in from store management and store associates." Ken's Kids works to build that support by meeting with managers. The Home Depot's district managers conduct orientation and training so store managers can uphold company policies and explain procedures to new associates.

Another reason the program is viable, she adds, is the level of support workers get from their coaches along the way.

Ken's Kids carefully assesses potential trainees using a five-step selection process—application, interview, observation, store assessment and parent interview—explains Deborah Callaghan, the

### Online Resources

For additional information about workers with autism, see the online version of this article at [www.shrm.org/hrmagazine/0610Owens](http://www.shrm.org/hrmagazine/0610Owens).

Pennsylvania state coordinator. She oversees 45 Home Depot associates with disabilities and is Baynard's coach.

Coaches "work side by side with trainees for three months in stores, reviewing tasks and things like product knowledge," explains Callaghan, who has a degree in special education. "Store managers receive sensitivity training as well."

Ken's Kids support services are free to workers with disabilities. Job coaches are paid by the program. It costs the program about \$3,200 per worker for the three-month intensive training. After three months, the amount of coaching starts to gradually decrease, but coaches continue to conduct spot checks on workers every two to six weeks, depending on the individual. Job coaches provide support as long as the worker is employed.

## On-the-Job Support

Having appropriate accommodations and support systems to help workers with autism is critical.

While job candidates must demonstrate an ability to function independently in the workplace, the HR professionals interviewed for this article said company leaders are mindful of various issues.

Jenny Castle, HR manager for a Windsor, Conn., Walgreens distribution center, offers one scenario. "If a candidate appears to struggle with how we have worded interview questions, we have a modified script that eliminates abstract language." Her site has employees with autism and other disabilities working



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side by side with other team members with the same production goals and pay. “For candidates with autism, this can be helpful.”

In other situations, she says, HR professionals may allow an advocate to help prepare the candidate or sit in during the interview to provide support. Many employees with autism need assistance with orientation and paperwork, she adds. “We work with community agencies to ensure this support is available. If the support is not available, we provide it.”

It’s not always smooth sailing. Castle recalls an instance of miscommunication that stemmed from the way one worker with autism received and interpreted instructions.

“We told a team member, ‘Feel free to stay until 1 p.m.’ For most people, that means stay until 1 p.m. or leave earlier,” she says, noting that people with autism tend to think in concrete terms. “This employee stood in front of the clock until exactly 1 p.m. and then left.”

In other cases, Castle says, workers with autism focus very well on their normal job tasks but, when faced with change, struggle with unknown factors.

“We try to be proactive and provide job aids like touch-screen computers with large icons and easy-to-read type to give the team members a reminder of what to do when change happens,” she says. “We do this by putting messages on the computer screens or displaying messages on or around their workstations.”

Castle emphasizes that “Autism affects each person in different ways. You have to be willing to try different ways of communicating, motivating and supporting employees in order to find the right fit for each individual.”

Callaghan, the Ken’s Kids coordinator at The Home Depot, agrees. She cites occasional problems, typically with co-work-

ers who wonder why another employee is getting “special treatment.” She says the company works on being proactive in its orientation programs for managers and associates and to gain buy-in so accommodations aren’t seen as special treatment.

During training, workers wear Ken’s Kids shirts and are encouraged, but not required, to wear them on the job. This helps

cue the public that the coach and the worker are a “team” and “in training,” Malinsky says.

Ken’s Kids can tout successful retention rates. The U.S. Department of Labor estimates that the yearly job turnover rate in retail sales is at least 50 percent. By the 10-year mark, Ken’s Kids had trained more than 155 young people and 102 were still employed—exceeding the national average.

### A Positive Reflection

Yet it’s not just quantitative data that indicates success when hiring individuals with autism, says Callaghan. There’s also the human factor. She has witnessed firsthand the camaraderie and appreciation from colleagues that her trainees experience. For many of these employees, it’s the first time in their lives that they’ve felt pride in their accomplishments.

For instance, Baynard has had several annual raises during his tenure at the Home Depot store. “Maurice is always smiling,” she says of Baynard, who lives with his grandmother and takes public transportation to work. “He never calls out and is not tardy. He’s very dedicated.”

The Home Depot is not the only *Fortune* 100 company involved with Ken’s Kids. In 2007, CVS Caremark came aboard as an employment partner, expanding the organization’s hiring capacity beyond Philadelphia. The program is now in Baltimore, New York City and Washington, D.C.

And CVS Caremark recruiters tap other organizations to help employ people with autism.

Steve Wing, director of workforce initiatives for CVS Caremark, says the company has multiple relationships. They include the federal Office of Disability Employment Policy, Goodwill Industries and Easter Seals. In 2009, Easter Seals received a \$300,000 grant from the CVS Caremark Charitable Trust to expand autism services for young children in several states.

“More customers and shareholders are asking, ‘What are you doing in the community?’” says Wing, who began his career at CVS Caremark 35 years ago loading trucks. “They want to see workers who reflect their community.”

In Phoenix, for instance, CVS Caremark partnered with the



Deborah Callaghan



Maurice Baynard

Southwest Autism Research & Resource Center for a pilot job placement program that resulted in 10 hires.

Candidates received life skills and vocational training at the center and were prepped for job responsibilities that ranged from operating the cash register to coding products. Average training costs range from \$3,000 to \$3,500 per student for six to nine months of classroom and on-the-job training. While coaches were available for support, seven of the employees eventually decided they no longer needed to use them. Coaches were paid by the state.

In addition, the center's instructors met with more than 100 CVS Caremark store managers and other employees. These sessions allowed them to explain autism, what to expect from their new colleagues and how to adapt so that the experience would prove positive for all involved.

The program has become "ingrained in the operations of our company," says Wing, who adds that companies that hire people with disabilities may qualify for federal and state work tax incentives. He also cites other advantages: CVS Caremark gets workers who are well-trained before they even enter the stores, and the company benefits by working with an agency that has its staffing needs in mind and can recruit accordingly.

"It's about helping people, but it's not charity. It's good business," Wing says.

### Mutual Benefit

CVS Caremark has won kudos, including the New Freedom Initiative award from the U.S. Department of Labor, for hiring people with disabilities.

It's not the only company garnering accolades: In 2008, Giant Food was recognized as Employer of the Year by the

Marriott Foundation for People with Disabilities. The recognition came for participation in the foundation's Bridges ... From School to Work program, which enhances employment opportunities for young people with disabilities, most of whom are economically disadvantaged.

Giant has worked closely with Bridges staff to place several young adults from the program in entry-level positions in their stores.

"We strive to be a responsible and reflective member of the communities we serve," says David White, director of human resources for the Landover, Md., supermarket chain. "These kinds of partnerships are mutually beneficial."

Beth Tattar, an assistant manager who handles hiring at the Giant store in Potomac, Md., agrees. In 2009, she personally nabbed the Marriott award.

Tattar, employed by the company since 1993, works with four students ages 17 to 19. They have autism and Down syndrome.

"Clearly there are some challenges, but nothing major," she says. "You just have to show a little extra care. Teach them, show them."

Wing, who has a sister with cerebral palsy, agrees. He ticks off numerous stories about CVS Caremark workers with autism. He recalls one in particular: "Chris started in our Kentucky store stocking shelves. The day of the grand opening, he was up front running the cash register. His parents couldn't believe it," he says, chuckling.

"That taught such a good lesson. ... Don't lock these people in; he learned from us, and now he has his own computer firm. Don't put parameters around them." ■

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