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People Feature

Shops Cite Advantages in Supporting Autistic Employees

By Carmen Germaine April 29, 2019

The rate of people diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders continues to rise, and many find themselves locked out of the workforce, but a few firms say they are working to change that.

Autism, as well as conditions such as attention deficit disorder, dyslexia or anxiety, can make a typical office a challenging environment. But research indicates that such neurological differences can be strengths — if companies accommodate employees and help them tap into their abilities.

In that spirit, **SEI** is expanding a summer internship program for people with autism, part of an effort to change the way the firm talks about ability and help its employees succeed, says Krista Deguffroy, inclusion and compliance leader for the firm's Workforce Development team.

"We're just finding different ways to develop and employ our human capital," she says. "That's the best strategy any organization can have."

Similarly, Fidelity works to accommodate people with diverse abilities, says Rachel Book, director of diversity recruiting partnerships and sourcing. The company is expanding an autism internship program to more offices and supporting managers in hiring interns of all abilities, Book says.

"Today's consumers, suppliers and businesses represent diverse backgrounds, experiences and values; as a customer-obsessed company, our workforce needs to be a reflection of that," she says in an e-mail.

More than 3.5 million Americans live with an autism spectrum disorder, according to stats published on the Autism Society website. And the rate of diagnoses is rising: One in 59 children were diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder in 2014, up from one in 68 as of 2010, according to a study published last year by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Neurodiversity can offer a competitive advantage for businesses seeking innovation and differentiated products and services, says Rob Austin, a professor at the University of Western Ontario's Ivey Business School.

"The best source of innovation is not in the parts of us that are the same, it's in the parts of us that we don't all share ... the parts of ourselves that require or are best served by accommodations," Austin says.

Earlier this year, Pimco co-founder Bill Gross disclosed his diagnosis with Asperger's syndrome, an autism spectrum disorder, and credited it with sharpening his focus as an investor.

"It's allowed me to stay at 30,000 feet as opposed to being on the ground," Gross said. "[I]t helps you to focus on the longer-term things without getting mixed up in the details."

Fidelity's internship program has given the company access to an otherwise untapped talent pool, and the resulting diversity has driven innovation and led to a deeper empathy for the firm's wide range of customers, Book says.

For companies that want to support neurodiversity, practical accommodations can help, Austin says. Helpful accommodations for employees with autism include lowering light and sound levels, providing earbuds to reduce noise, and even repainting walls to softer colors, he says.

Coaching can also be beneficial for affected employees, such as guidance on what not to say to coworkers, he notes. Further, managers and coworkers should receive guidance on how to support neurodiverse colleagues.

"[A] lot of people who are on the autism spectrum know they need this kind of coaching and want this kind of coaching," Austin says.

SEI's internship program includes several "discovery weeks" in which candidates focus on "employment readiness tasks," like attending meetings or conducting research, while getting familiar with SEI's culture, Deguffroy says.

Fidelity works with AspireWorks, the National Technical Institute for the Deaf and other organizations in its application process and to provide on-the-job support, Book says.

The firm is also part of the Autism at Work Roundtable, a group of companies with autism-focused hiring initiatives. SEI is part of the Autism at Work Eastern Regional Group.

But as firms work to support employees, they need to remember that what works for one person won't necessarily work for another.

Companies should make sure employees know how to request accommodations, because not all workers want them, says Jill Houghton, president of Diversity:IN. And managers should be made aware of how to pay for any changes necessary to accommodate them, Houghton says.

SEI initially offered the first four interns in its program "every accommodation," from different seating to job coaches, Deguffroy says.

"They told us, 'We don't have any special accommodations when we're at school; we just want to be treated like everyone else,'" Deguffroy says.

Managers involved in neurodiversity programs often say the experience made them a better manager overall.

"Somewhere along the way, it dawns on them that that's not a bad way to work with all their employees," Austin says.

Managers in SEI's internship program found that to be true, Deguffroy says. Improving their communication about deadlines and expectations for interns with autism led to better team communications and team dynamics overall, she says.

The firm also saw a surge in self-disclosure — employees with high-functioning autism or who had been diagnosed with ADHD but had not sought other accommodations, for example, came forward to share their stories and offer support to colleagues, she says.

Senior leaders' coming forward and identifying as people with disabilities or allies of people with disabilities is part of creating a culture of inclusion, Disability:IN's Houghton says.

"It really creates culture where people can be authentic, where it's safe to be who they are and to have that conversation with their manager," she says.