

SAP's Autism at Work Program Provides Meaningful Employment for People on the Autism Spectrum



[This case study reflects details of SAP's Autism at Work Program in 2017. The most up-to-date details are available online.]

OVERVIEW

SAP is a multinational software company whose research and development locations (SAP Labs), employ over 2,500 people throughout Canada. Finding candidates with the right technical skills and competencies to serve this competitive market is no easy task. One of the ways that SAP has met this challenge is by hiring individuals who are neurodiverse* through their Autism at Work program.

The Autism at Work program began as a weekend project in Bangalore, India in 2012. The following case study outlines the recruitment and selection process that was developed and includes information cited from The Conference Board of Canada.**

OBJECTIVES

In May of 2013, SAP announced that they would partner globally with Specialisterne, a leading not-for-profit organization specializing in harnessing the talents of people with autism, to reach their goal and develop the Autism at Work Program. In addition to partnering with Specialisterne, SAP Labs Canada's objectives were to:

- Leverage the skill sets and talents of neurodiverse candidates.
- Partner with local organizations that are experts in working with neurodiverse candidates and encourage other organizations to hire neurodiverse talent.
- Create an inclusive work environment by educating staff about neurodiversity.

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APPROACH

SAP started by piloting the Autism at Work program at 7 of their locations globally and put forward a 5-year plan. At SAP Labs Vancouver, milestones were met by:

- Partnering with experts in ASD space in hiring neurodiverse talent.
- Rethinking the process for the outreach and sourcing of candidates.
- Replacing formal job interviews with recruitment workshops.
- Working with a job coach for neurodiverse candidates.
- Providing education and training for hiring managers and teams.

Partnering with Experts in the ASD Space

SAP knew from the very beginning that in order to make the greatest impact, working with partners that understood the subject matter of neurodiversity would be key.

With the help of Specialisterne and Open Door Group at their Vancouver location, they reviewed their recruitment practices to identify any barriers that were being faced by applicants with autism. Quickly, it became very clear that traditional resume screening and interview processes serve as a major barrier to many candidates with autism because they rely heavily on past work experience and in-person meetings which many individuals with ASD struggle with. Having partners with experience, made it much easier to adapt these processes to meet the needs of everyone involved.

In 2017, SAP Labs Vancouver added Pacific Autism Family Network (PAFN) and Ready, Willing and Able (RWA) as partners in this initiative to greater extend their reach of qualified candidates.

Reviewing the Process for the Outreach and Sourcing of Candidates

The Autism at Work program is not a completely altruistic pursuit. The identification of roles would begin with an internal review of business needs and a discussion with hiring managers on whether a role could be filled by an individual on the autism spectrum. Keeping staffing goals front of mind, SAP would work with partners to determine “must have” essential and “nice to have” qualifications or skills. Although hiring managers were encouraged to look for job opportunities that candidates on the autism spectrum could perform, they were reminded that their hiring decisions should be based on the business needs first. If an individual who is neurodiverse is determined to be suitable for the position, SAP would work with its partners to source potential candidates for the role.

The next step of this process is ensuring that job advertisements are accessible. Once a business decision is made to fill a position with someone who is neurodiverse, SAP would work with its partners to rewrite the job description to make it more accessible to people on the autism

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spectrum. The job advertisement includes a job description along with a breakdown of the key tasks to be performed and the skills required.

Even with more accessible job postings, sourcing candidates who are neurodiverse isn't necessarily easy. SAP would use several methods for finding and reaching candidates on the autism spectrum. Some of the most common activities includes: posting in online communities, local autism blogs, support groups, university and college job boards, as well as mainstream job advertisement postings.

When initially piloting, the media was also used to help spread the word about SAP's new recruitment approach. Regardless of the medium used to advertise job opportunities, all candidates are directed to apply through SAP's partner's websites as a way of vetting this process.

Replacing Formal Job Interviews with Recruitment Discovery Workshops

It is difficult to assess people on the autism spectrum using traditional methods, so rather than having candidates submit resumes, and participate in standard interviews, they were asked to fill out a questionnaire that indicates their interests and experience outside of work. Partners would review all applications to come up with a list of candidates to invite to a recruitment workshop.

Candidates who fit the job posting descriptions were invited to a discovery workshop onsite at SAP. This consisted of several tasks, including a LEGO® robot building exercise; all activities were designed with the purpose of creating a comfort zone around each individual so their strengths can emerge.

The team at SAP and their partners spend the better part of a day with the candidates during this process to work on these tasks or a project. The focus shifted from general communication and socialization skills to the specific attributes and capabilities required to perform the job. This process allowed SAP to see how the potential candidates initiate, problem-solve, and communicate within the context of the work. There was also an opportunity to learn more about them in a one-on-one meeting. This replaced the traditional interview process.

From this day-long process, a business profile of each candidate was created—describing the candidate's technical competencies, how they work, and what makes them unique. They also made recommendations to SAP based on a candidate's 'fit' for a role that had been identified. This was a key component for success.

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Hiring managers were not present during the recruitment workshops which allowed applicants to spend a day working on a project without pressure. At the end of a workshop, hiring managers would receive a business profile of each candidate prior to meeting any of the applicants.

Training and Coaching of Hiring Managers

The recruitment workshop allowed SAP hiring managers to determine which candidates would be a good fit for the specific job being filled. Candidates who were selected participated in an onsite classroom training program, lasting about four weeks.

During these classroom sessions, candidates prepared for the routine of being in an office—learning about e-mail etiquette, dress code, and the process of commuting to and from work. Hiring managers also provided a project for employees to work on so they could demonstrate their capabilities. This allowed the employee to get comfortable with the working environment and become familiar with the tasks before officially beginning their role.

After the decision has been made, a job coach worked with the new employee for a transition period—typically with more frequent interaction during the first three months and then regular touchpoints going forward.

Additional Training for the Entire Team

In order to integrate a truly neurodiverse workforce, education for the broader workforce is critical. SAP would hold education sessions for managers, and to create an environment where all employees can open up a conversation on concrete, tangible topics that apply not just to people on the autism spectrum, but to everyone. These topics included communication style, language, the physical environment, and the work process.

To help ensure that the team is inclusive and supportive, SAP worked with its partners to provide education sessions to build awareness, acceptance, and buy-in. The sessions provided an opportunity for team members to ask questions and better prepare themselves for working with a new team member on the autism spectrum.

The training would be ongoing, and the job coaches were a key bridge between the new hire and other team members, helped to create a successful onboarding experience.

OUTCOMES

The Autism at Work program has continued to evolve since its inception and the outcomes that have been realized include:

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- A total of four waves of cohorts were brought through the Autism at Work program in Canada, three of which were in Vancouver, Montreal and Toronto.
- Local partnerships continue to grow (Open Door Group, Pacific Autism Family Network, RWA).
- In 2017, 12 employees who are neurodiverse were employed at SAP Labs Vancouver.

LESSONS LEARNED

SAP Labs Vancouver has learned a lot during the development and implementation of this program, and a few of the key learnings are listed below.

Accessible Job Postings

Ensuring that job postings and advertisements are accessible for neurodiverse candidates is an easy first step to take. When considering candidates on the autism spectrum, this means reviewing the job posting and advertisement descriptions to make sure they include a breakdown of the key tasks to be performed and the skills required for each. The more specific details, the better. It is also recommended that HR teams get outside feedback from experts in the subject of neurodiversity to make sure the descriptions are clear.

Wellbeing of Employees

Being in a new work environment can be challenging for anyone, especially for those who are neurodiverse. As the Autism at Work program has continued to grow, the importance of ensuring the continuation of job coach support being available to individuals at any time during their employment with SAP.

As a result, job coach support was extended beyond the initial first three months with other regular touchpoints to provide support as required. This is not only a good practice to check-in on progress, but it also helps to prevent situations where they may feel too overwhelmed—increasing the likelihood of having more sick days or even not coming into work at all.

Accommodating to the Needs of Neurodiverse Employees

These accommodations do not necessarily cost a lot of money, in fact, in many cases, this can be as simple as allowing the employee to have a quiet space they can go to if they start to feel anxious or giving them extra time during their break so they can orientate themselves for their next task.

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NEXT STEPS

SAP's Autism at Work program has further evolved since 2017. Recently, SAP launched an Autism Inclusion Pledge which aims to re-shape thinking about employment possibilities for autistic individuals.

The program shares SAP's best practices to accelerate the autism inclusion journey of employers worldwide. This initiative encourages customers and partners to join an ever-growing community of companies leading the way to support autism inclusion in the workplace.

SAP Senior HR Business Partner Malinee Narang, said that:

"...since SAP was invited to join as a member of the Presidents Group in Vancouver, it's help to make an introduction to many new business leaders and employers who have an interest in becoming more inclusive. This has helped to bridge the gap [for some of these employers] to now introduce the Autism at Work program within their organizations as a way for hiring new employees."

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