

Organization Offers Exposure to People with Asperger's Syndrome

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By Pamela Babcock

MORRISTOWN, N.J.—A new nonprofit organization working to educate employers about the benefits of hiring individuals with Asperger's syndrome—and the kinds of challenges and accommodations associated with the condition—says interest among major corporations has been positive.

"We've been greatly encouraged by the response that we've gotten already," Asperger's expert and author Michael John Carley, executive director of The Asperger Syndrome Training & Employment Partnership (ASTEP), told attendees Nov. 3, 2011, at the Career Opportunities for Students with Disabilities annual conference here.

Asperger's is a developmental disorder on the autism spectrum that affects a person's ability to socialize and communicate. Such individuals often exhibit social awkwardness, have an all-absorbing interest in specific topics and possess average to above-average IQs, Carley said.

Carley should know. He's the author of the book *Asperger's From the Inside Out* (Perigee Trade, 2008) and executive director of The Global and Regional Asperger Syndrome Partnership, a membership organization for adults diagnosed with autism. In addition, he and his son were diagnosed with Asperger's a week apart in 2000.

Carley said that the number of people diagnosed on the spectrum continues to grow and that early intervention means that more are achieving higher levels of education and developing stronger professional capabilities.

"Individuals with Asperger's syndrome are an untapped workforce characterized by focus, loyalty and high productivity," Carley said. Efforts made to minimize the importance of "water cooler conversations" and socializing with colleagues after work make it easier for individuals with the condition to succeed in the workplace, he explained.

'I Saw a Real Need'

ASTEP is based in New York City and was founded by Marcia Scheiner in 2010 after she left a 25-year career as a financial services executive. Scheiner, now president of the group, said that as the parent of a young adult with Asperger's, "I saw a real need."

ASTEP hopes to partner with employment support professionals who work with individuals with Asperger's to identify candidates and prepare them for employment transition, which would include recommended accommodations. Support professionals would train and coach HR, managers and colleagues on behavioral differences and mentor the employee for an introductory period, a model that has proved to be successful for individuals with other kinds of disabilities.

ASTEP plans to track metrics on tenure, performance ratings and the incidence of employee relations issues.

Scheiner said that an estimated 80 percent of those diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder are younger than age 20. She predicted that there will be a “huge population” of adults on the spectrum entering the workforce in the next decade.

The bad news is that most will never be fully employed, and many will be underemployed, she said. “They still have an abysmal job employment rate, and, for the ones who do get jobs, they have a very terrible retention rate,” Scheiner said.

Strengths and Challenges

According to Carley, some possible strengths of an employee with Asperger’s include honesty “to a fault”; loyalty; accuracy and attention to detail; high level of technical ability; good concentration on routines and procedures; memory for facts and figures; and a logical approach to tasks. Yet they are more likely to have an intense focus on limited interests, might be “literal-minded” and inflexible, and might have anxiety and sensory challenges, he added.

“We like text; we’re not too good with nonverbal communications,” Carley said. Case in point: “The first time when I was a kid and I heard the phrase ‘Let’s toast the bride and groom,’ I had nightmares for weeks,” Carley said.

Things That Can Help

Possible accommodations for employees with Asperger’s include:

- Modifying the interview process so that it focuses less on socialization. “If the interview process were more focused on job performance, you’d see a lot better hiring rates,” Carley said.
- Clear communication backed up in writing. “So many of the problems that arise on human resource [professionals’] desks with employees with Asperger’s syndrome usually revolve around something not having been clearly communicated,” Carley said.
- Detailed and specific job descriptions, flexible work hours (particularly if the employee has anxiety because of over-stimulation), and lighting and workspace adjustments (to minimize headaches from fluorescent lights).
- Mentoring intended to teach the company’s social rules. This is critical, Carley said, because “they’re never explained and they’re never put on the job description.”

Other Takeaways

Carley said that hiring people with autism is good for business. Conservative estimates are that 10.5 million people (3.4 percent of the U.S. population) are touched by autism, perhaps by having a family member with the diagnosis, he explained. “If you’re doing really well in terms of your hiring and retention practices for people on the [autism] spectrum, please publicize it,” Carley said. “Other companies need to see you doing that because ... that’s going to inspire them to do the same.”

Next Steps

While ASTEP has yet to serve as the go-between for an official hire, Scheiner said some employers want to be introduced to people with the syndrome before making commitments. ASTEP has gathered a dozen highly qualified young adults with Asperger's from the New York tri-state region. In the coming months, five major national employers, including an international law firm and global consulting firm, have agreed to host two-hour sessions in their offices.

HR representatives and line employees will talk about the job search