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## The untapped workforce that's helping a Radnor-based corporate tax firm

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When Global Tax Management hired a part-time intern last year from the Pathway School, a private school for young adults on the autism spectrum, company officials expected him to be a great fit for filing and other basic administrative duties.

They didn't expect that in less than two months, the 20-year-old would be working with the company's in-house programmer to help design automated tax management software.

"It was a perfect match," said [Dave Laurinaitis](#), GTM's CEO, who is now preparing to offer the student, [Shawn Luther](#), a part-time programming position.

GTM's experience echoes those of other companies in the region and around the world as more and more enterprises tap into the untapped workforce potential of people on the autism spectrum.

[Dianne Malley](#), project director of the Life Course Outcomes' Transition Pathway's initiative at Drexel University's A.J. Drexel Autism Institute, said for some employers, it is simply a matter of getting to know an individual with autism.

"People are given opportunities, and many, many people can go way farther than what people have thought," she said.

While autism rates and awareness of autism spectrum disorders are on the rise, autistic individuals have historically had a difficult time finding employment. A 2015 study from Drexel's Life Course Outcomes Research Program reports that just 58 percent of young adults on the spectrum worked



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Shawn Luther, a 20-year-old student at the Pathways School, secured a position at Global Tax Management performing clerical work before employees realized he's a skilled programmer and brought him onto their IT staff.

for pay after high school, a rate the study said was much lower than adults in that age range with other disabilities.

Malley said that lack of employment is partially tied to preparation during the high school years, or lack thereof. About 90 percent of the young adults with autism who worked for pay in high school also had a job post-graduation, while just 40 percent of young autistic adults who didn't work in school maintained employment in their early 20s.

While gainful employment provides self-confidence, a sense of self-worth, economic mobility and independence, it isn't just important for the young adult and their families, Malley said.

"Poor employment outcomes, we know, results in lower quality of life later on in life. The less economic stability means a higher cost to society. So if we don't all get on board and look at our policies and programs and options to really support people with autism getting into the workplace and their skills being fully utilized, there's going to be a huge societal cost later on," she said.

That's part of the reason the Pathway School designed the internship program that GTM tapped into, said [Dave Shultheis](#), Pathway's president.

"It's a pretty misunderstood disability because it manifests itself in many different ways," he said.

The push to take advantage of the skills of an autistic workforce has grown in recent years. Global nonprofit Specialisterne is a leading advocate for the career development of autistic individuals, helping major corporations like Microsoft, IBM, JPMorgan Chase, SAP and others recruit autistic people for positions in tech, including in data analysis, coding and software testing.

SAP, which has its North American headquarters in Newtown Square, launched an Autism at Work program back in 2013 with the goal of having 1 percent of SAP's global workforce be on the autism spectrum by 2020.

They're well on their way to the goal, said [Jose Velasco](#), who heads up the program at SAP. About 116 of its employees in nine counties and 38 locations are autistic, performing positions including software development, customer support, graphic design, media communications and human resources. The programs give the enterprise software company an edge in hiring the top talent, especially talent that might go untapped, he said.

"We are in a very, very competitive landscape, and as we always do in the tech space, things are changing so rapidly we started looking at the 360 degree benefits of hiring someone who is on the spectrum and what it would bring the company," he said. "Innovation comes from the edges. Not from the people at the center, but from people who look at things in a different way."

While each person on the autism spectrum has different capabilities and talents, advocates say the tendency for individuals with autism to focus intently on certain tasks, along with their photographic memories, work ethic, analytic processing skills and reliability can be key assets to an organization.

Despite those skills and high credentials, Velasco said many are passed over for positions because of other unique traits, such as inability to read social cues, bluntness and other communication issues that may not come across well in an interview. But hiring an individual is far from a charity act, he said.

“We are not doing them a favor,” Velasco said. “These are brilliant people who can bring a lot of value to an organization.”

Their honesty in communication can actually be a perk, he said, cutting around unproductive tip-toeing to get to the crux of a problem.

“We had two managers that came to me and told me that we had an issue with a team, and one team member on the spectrum just called it for what it was. That was refreshing,” Velasco said.

Of course, there are some challenges.

Acclimating employees who are on the autism spectrum to proper social etiquette in the office, and ensuring they have transportation and are personally prepared for the responsibilities of a job can be issues for some, experts said. SAP has a five-week program for individuals in its Autism at Work program, and the Pathway School coaches students to make that a smoother process and supports employers in making sure neurotypical coworkers and managers know what to expect and how best to communicate.

Malley said one way to help that was to present profiles of new employees to let colleagues know who they are as a person, beyond being on the spectrum.

“The more we base things on the person and sell the person for the job, not that you’re getting someone with autism and they have these interests. A person-first approach goes a long way,” she said.

Shultheis, of the Pathway School, said progress is being made. It’s getting slightly easier for them to find work locations for their students, especially over the last couple of years.

“We as a society are headed in the right direction,” he said. “That said, there’s still an awful lot of stigma to erase... [GTM] has just scratched the surface of what that young man can do for them.”

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