

Some employers find those with autism especially suited for jobs

By Ashley Johnson

For The Sun

Last Modified: Jan 18, 2012 02:37AM

Finding steady work in this economy isn't easy. The challenge is magnified for individuals with disabilities such as autism, who often have difficulty with social interaction.

Experts and parents are trying to change that by helping employers understand what this population has to offer.

"There's an untapped pool of potential workers available in the special needs community that can really do a great job for many employers," said Naperville resident Karen Thomas, whose 19-year-old son, Eric, is autistic.

A graduate of Waubonsie Valley High School, Eric works part time as a janitor at Brookdale Music in Naperville and a greeter at Still Middle School in Aurora. Thomas credits the vocational coordinator at Waubonsie for helping her son find those jobs.

Reaching out

Some employers also are reaching out to individuals with autism spectrum disorders. Turning Pointe Autism Foundation recently launched a career development program that involves partnering with Fortune 500 companies, such as Walgreens, to develop career opportunities for people with communication disorders.

Chris Simler, director of career development services at Turning Pointe, said the program includes courses that address career and life skills. Individuals will be able to learn in a mock environment before transitioning into an actual workplace.

The goal is to "create new opportunities for people with disabilities and give them a career in the community," Simler said.

He stressed there is no typical job for a person with autism. He knows of people working in jobs as varied as retail, data entry, accounting and social work.

"I don't see the walls," Simler said. "The more we can put people with autism in different places the more awareness we can create."

One place is Aspiritech, a nonprofit in Highland Park that hires high-functioning individuals on the autism spectrum to test software. The organization's name combines the words Asperger's, spirit and technology.

Moshe Weitzberg, director of operations, said Aspiritech has 14 employees, including his 32-year-old son,

who has Asperger's syndrome. His workers have the ability to focus and spot irregularities that other people would miss. They also deal with challenges related to their autism — some do not like noise or bright lights and many have anxiety issues. Aspiritech has an autism specialist who provides support that extends beyond the workplace.

“This is something that not every company is willing to do,” Weitzberg said.

Productive workers

Professor Scott Standifer of the University of Missouri's Disability Policy and Studies office said the key to employment is matching a person's skills and features with job requirements. Employers also need to build in supports and make sure co-workers understand the person's communication style.

Businesses that hire people with autism “can have not only loyal employees, but loyal customers that come attached to them as family members, advocates and friends,” Standifer added.

Thomas agreed. She recalled attending an event to recognize employers who have hired people with disabilities. Several managers said they had hired disabled students to do a nice thing but found out they made great employees.

“It has become a real win-win for them and the students,” she said. “That's what we're trying to educate the small business owners and the hiring managers in the community on — that we're not asking for charity, we know that our students can be productive workers.”

In both his jobs, Eric started out with a job coach but now works independently, which Thomas called “fantastic.”

Laurie and Jim Jerue of Naperville recognized that their daughter loved to stay busy but would face significant barriers to traditional employment because of her severe autism. They developed a home-based business called Helper Girl through which Sarah, 23, performs tasks, including document shredding and container planting.

“It's all geared to Sarah's strengths and her interests as well as my own,” Laurie Jerue said, “so we kind of melded the two into this little business.”