

A man with dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark blue patterned suit jacket, a dark striped shirt, and a teal tie, is sitting and holding a small globe of the Earth. He is looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background shows a large window with a view of a city skyline.

# Neurodiversity

Driving innovation  
from unexpected places



Building a better  
working world



# A neurodiverse world is a better working world

To drive sustainable growth in the 21st century, businesses need to continually innovate and identify new sources of talent. Leading companies are finding that people on the autism spectrum can spur innovation and often have the very skills they're looking for. Companies are also discovering new benefits for their brands, customer relationships, employee engagement and more.

Though many people with autism are intelligent, well-educated and eager to work, they often face interpersonal challenges that make it difficult to get in the door. According to a Drexel University study, 58% of young adults with autism are unemployed. This can lead to isolation, financial insecurity and social and economic dependence on family, government and community-based organizations. However, some employers are turning these challenges into opportunities. Read on to learn how EY is helping diversify its talent pool, excite its workforce and drive innovation and productivity by hiring neurodiverse professionals.

## Neurodiversity in a connected world

The business world is rapidly changing, fueled by increasingly sophisticated technology and an accelerating pace of innovation. As businesses adopt applications like AI (artificial intelligence), robotics and process automation, they become more data-driven and connected. Strong analytics and cybersecurity are critical for effective, stable operations. However, there's a shortage of STEM (science, technology, engineering, math) talent needed to do this vital work. Moreover, the overall workforce is shrinking. Organizations need to maximize their human resources by enabling their most highly skilled workers to focus on the highest value activities. One of the ways they're doing this is by streamlining and automating labor-intensive processes. STEM skills are needed to do that work too. Leading

companies such as, SAP, Microsoft, HPE and professional services firm Ernst & Young LLP are addressing strategic business issues by leveraging an often-overlooked pool of talent – people on the autism spectrum.

Neurodiverse individuals are often technologically inclined and detail-oriented, with strong skills in analytics, mathematics, pattern recognition and information processing – among the very skills businesses most urgently need. They thrive on predictability and can be especially tenacious and loyal workers who prefer to stay with one organization rather than move from opportunity to opportunity. Companies are finding that people with autism approach problems differently and that their logical, straightforward thinking can spur process improvements that greatly increase productivity.

EY's neurodiversity initiative had four key phases – **scoping, getting buy-in, building, and measuring.**

## Driving innovation through neurodiversity

To consistently deliver high-quality services to clients, EY professionals must perform a wide array of detailed tasks, calculations and processes. Technical professionals handle some of these activities, including data collection and analytics, engagement economics, and document tracking and control. They generally work for one client and are based at the client's office alongside colleagues focused more on client relationships, higher level analytics and complex business issues. To drive even greater efficiencies, EY took the specialization one step further. In Philadelphia the firm set up a new Center of Excellence (CoE) where a team of EY office-based professionals handles some of the most time-consuming, repetitive tasks for a number of client engagements across various areas of the business.



## Scoping the project

EY is one of the first professional services organizations doing this work, and there are few precedents. The usual recruiting, training and onboarding practices don't necessarily apply well to people with autism. The firm needed to create new ways of doing things and assemble a new team to figure out how.

Talent professionals with recruiting and disabilities subject matter knowledge came together with functional managers to form a project team. The project team then made a list of the external resources they'd need to source, select, onboard and support the new hires. Those resources included the following:

- **Sourcing** – organizations that specialize in recruiting and screening neurodiverse candidates
- **Job coaches** – trainers to help neurodiverse hires adjust to the business environment and negotiate interpersonal relationships at work
- **Community partners** – government agencies and nonprofits supporting these activities

The team enlisted the EY resources required to build and run the pilot, as well as the key internal stakeholders they'd need to consult. Those included the following:

- **Project management** – The launch team included recruiting and diverse abilities professionals, functional area leaders and managers.
- **Stakeholders** – These included recruiting, legal, local office leadership, administration, talent professionals and professionals in job descriptions, compensation, training and benefits.

The project team surveyed other employers, and spoke with vendors, community service providers, schools, advocacy organizations and other constituents to determine costs and which program elements EY would create and run and which would be outsourced. It was decided that CoE members would be full-time employees and compensated on the same scale as other technical professionals in similar roles. The existing role description was revised based on the location, responsibilities, education and skills required for this new position.

## Statistics



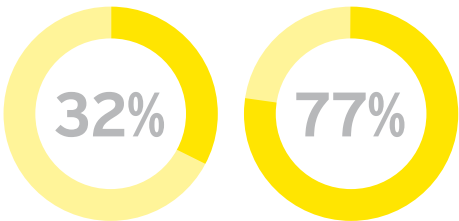
Fewer than **one in six autistic adults** is in full-time employment.

**16%**

Less than 16% of survey participants have full-time paid work. This figure has hardly changed since 2007.

**51%**

Slightly more than half of autistic people in work said their skills were higher than those their job required.



**Only 32% are in some kind of paid work.** More than three-quarters (77%) who are unemployed say they want to work.

Source: National Autism Indicators Report, Drexel University

# Getting buy-in from the business

Though the idea for exploring neurodiverse talent originated with senior firm leaders, testing it out required buy-in from many constituents – an executive sponsor, local office leadership, a range of functional stakeholders and the business owners in the lines of business the new hires would be supporting.

### Yvonne's story

“My son has autism. At a recent event, I shared how delighted I am that EY is not only hiring, but collaborating with other employers to expand career opportunities for individuals with autism. Afterwards, one of our interns came up to say that he has a little cousin with autism and that EY’s commitment to neurodiversity gave him hope for the future.”

**Yvonne Metcalfe**  
Principal, International Tax Services EY Americas  
Member, EY Americas Inclusiveness Council

The project team prepared a high-level budget for their sponsor. After securing approval, they began soliciting support from the senior leaders of the lines of business and finally, from the highest levels of leadership in the Americas firm.

### The pilot

In 2016, the firm hired four individuals to work in a new Philadelphia Neurodiversity Center of Excellence (CoE). Philadelphia was chosen as a pilot location for its proximity to universities with good STEM and autism-specific programs, its location midway between DC and NY, and its history of generating strong candidates for SAP’s Autism at Work program. The office also had suitable workspace and a highly supportive leadership team. Creating the CoE took several months, divided into four stages.

## Know your terms

### Neurodiversity

a concept that considers the range of differences in human brain function and behavioral traits as normal variations. Though often used to refer to the autism spectrum, some definitions may include learning disabilities and even mental health conditions.

### Autism

a developmental condition marked by difficulty in communicating and forming relationships and in using language and abstract concepts.

### Autism Spectrum Disorder

describes a range of neurodevelopmental disorders varying in degrees of impact on daily functioning. Recently, advocates have begun referring to “autism spectrum,” dropping the term “disorder,” to stress that neurological differences are normal human variations.

### High-functioning autism

generally refers to types of autism with more limited impacts and average or above-average IQ, such as Asperger’s syndrome. Some advocates dislike this term, favoring Asperger’s syndrome or simply autism.

### Asperger's syndrome

is an autism spectrum disorder characterized by social, emotional and communication challenges. Individuals have average or above average IQs and may be referred to as having “high-functioning autism.”

### Neurotypical

people who do not have autism or other neurological variations.

### Autistic

someone with autism syndrome; some disability advocates prefer the terms, “with autism” or, “has autism” though others prefer the term “autistic.”

# Building a Neurodiversity Center of Excellence

## #1 Sourcing

An external vendor, Specialisterne, sourced candidates for Philadelphia; additional candidates were identified through employee referrals, parent and advocacy groups, universities and personal contacts. After learning a lot about sourcing during the pilot, the project team determined they’d manage sourcing for any additional hires and/or other CoEs.

## #2 Screening

Specialisterne screened Philadelphia candidates via phone and then brought them into the office for a half-day of group activities – a “hang out” designed to assess critical thinking, technical skills and teaming. This was followed by short informal interviews with the project team.

## #3 Assessment and training

In the pilot, candidates who were selected to advance following the “hang out” and interview attended a three-week interpersonal skills training. The highest performers were extended job offers. Going forward, the project team customized that training and condensed it into the SuperWeek, which combines team-based work simulations, interpersonal skills development and introductions to the role and firm. The highest performing candidates receive job offers at week’s end.

## #4 Onboarding and support

Onboarding and training is conducted by hiring managers who’ve taken formal training in autism, have gotten to know the candidates throughout the sourcing and selection process and have experience supervising EY’s neurodiverse professionals in Philadelphia.

### Training and support for all

Neurodiverse account support professionals are not the only EY professionals who receive training and support. Supervisors, hiring managers, office buddies, counselors and key office staff take customized neurodiversity training and receive ongoing support from the project team, external coaches and service providers.

A key element in helping the new hires acclimate to their new role is hiring and training them as cohorts.

Working in a small group helps them get comfortable, build relationships and create a sense of community. Supervision is more efficient, as managers learn faster from interacting with several people who have autism rather than just one or two and the new hires come to know each other’s strengths and weaknesses and pitch in to help each other. To minimize distractions and promote teaming, CoE members are seated together in a relatively quiet, low traffic location.

Training continues well after the new hires join the CoE. For six weeks, they receive intensive technical instruction in data analytics, document tracking, quality control and robotic process automation. New tasks are added to their portfolio according to the needs of each office. In Dallas, for example, neurodiverse account support professionals are working in cybersecurity in addition to their core tasks.

Each new hire is paired with an office buddy and a counselor to support their career development.

An external coach visits the office and consults by phone to help the new hires navigate any interpersonal and life-management issues.



# Measuring success

In evaluating the pilot, EY considered business metrics only. Though they expected positive impacts on people and brand, they knew the program would be most sustainable if it could demonstrate value on the basis of “hard” measurements like work quality, efficiency and productivity. The pilot achieved that and more.

“I love working with EY because programs like this demonstrate the firm’s commitment to being a purpose-driven company.”

**Steve Peck**  
Senior Vice President,  
Global Strategic  
Initiatives, SAP



### Sam’s story

“My dad was worried about me finding a good job and making it on my own after college. When I landed the job at EY, that changed. My dad was proud of me and said he now knew I had a good career ahead of me.”

**Sam Briefer**  
Account Support Associate, EY

Neurodiverse teams teach EY people every day to be better managers and colleagues. They instill pride in EY’s culture, set the firm apart as an innovator and a leader, and help the people of EY build a better working world.

### The impact on innovation

After nine months, EY compared the work quality, efficiency and productivity generated by neurodiverse and neurotypical account support professionals. Quality, efficiency and productivity were comparable, but the neurodiverse employees excelled at innovation.

- ▶ In the first month, they identified process improvements that cut the time for technical training in half.
- ▶ They learned how to automate processes far faster than the neurotypical account professionals they trained with. They then used the resulting downtime to create training videos to help all professionals learn automation more quickly.

### The impact on leadership

The professionals role has been largely learned informally on the job. To make it more understandable to people with autism, the team needed to break apart every process into logical steps and explain them in sequence in clear, straightforward language. The documentation produced for neurodiverse account professionals is now helping all account professionals learn faster and become productive more quickly.

To communicate effectively with people who have autism, managers needed to learn to communicate in specific ways. The idioms many people take for granted in everyday conversation can confuse people with autism because they often interpret expressions literally. Working with people on the autism spectrum has made managers more patient. They’ve learned to avoid abstract language and use shorter, more precise words. This has made them better communicators and more inclusive leaders, which is especially important in EY’s increasingly diverse workforce where professionals are often from different countries, cultures and backgrounds and may use language in different ways.

### The impact on pride

EY people have been tremendously energized by the firm’s commitment to hire neurodiverse individuals. Many have family members or friends with autism and know firsthand how a program like this can change lives. People at all ranks, from junior staff to senior partners, have reached out to express their pride and offer their support. They’re exploring applications for their practices, becoming buddies, discussing EY’s program with clients and assisting with new CoE launches. They’re excited and grateful to feel a part of how the firm is helping build a better working world.

### The impact on purpose

EY’s neurodiversity program has received considerable media attention. It demonstrates the firm’s commitment to building a better working world and strengthens EY’s brand position as a leader and innovator with an exceptionally diverse and inclusive people culture. Collaborating with other companies who have or are exploring neurodiversity programs has helped create new relationships and enhanced existing ones. It’s a fresh conversation that touches both the business and EY people in very personal ways.

“The enthusiasm from our office has been just tremendous. After the pilot team spoke at one of our town halls, people waited in line asking how to get involved. I’ve heard from so many people who have shared how proud they are that the firm is doing something like this and that this office was chosen for the pilot.”

**Chris Bruner**  
Philadelphia Office  
Managing Partner



At a surprise office party, Philadelphia Office Managing Partner Chris Bruner accepts EY’s Better Begins with You Award for Innovation from Americas Managing Partner Steve Howe.



### Jamell’s story

“Their first week with us I remember telling the team I needed to go talk to someone in the office and would be back in two minutes. When I got back, they looked distressed. One spoke up for the group, pointed to his watch and said, ‘That was actually six minutes.’ They taught me a lot in those six minutes. By learning how to communicate effectively with our neurodiverse professionals, I think I communicate better with everyone. It’s definitely made me a better manager.”

**Jamell Mitchell**  
Associate Director - Americas  
ASA Program, EY

### Key success factors

- #1 Senior executive, businessleader and stakeholder buy-in
- #2 People and budget to build and run the program
- #3 The right kind of work environment
- #4 A long-term mindset

About EY

EY is a global leader in assurance, tax, transaction and advisory services. The insights and quality services we deliver help build trust and confidence in the capital markets and in economies the world over. We develop outstanding leaders who team to deliver on our promises to all of our stakeholders. In so doing, we play a critical role in building a better working world for our people, for our clients and for our communities.

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