Maria Auxiliadora Ramirez is 28 years old. She has a Bachelor’s Degree in Advertising. She is educated, motivated, detail-oriented, and talented. She also has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).

In 2011, after overcoming many obstacles, Ramirez was accepted into the Cargill Venezuela Engranados Training and Labor Inclusion Center. “Engranados” is Spanish for “engaged,” and during the one-year program at the center, Ramirez worked with a team of specialized instructors to learn how to become more engaged with office activities, as well as how to adapt behavior within the work environment. Ramirez is now an administrative assistant in Corporate Affairs at Cargill and continues to flourish. Ramirez says, “For the first time in my life, I made friends on my own, I was given the opportunity to succeed in my work life-they gave me the tools to be a winner. Today more than ever, I feel like part of this huge family called Cargill.”

According to Cargill Venezuela, Engranados was created as an innovative way to incorporate persons with disabilities into the workplace. The objective of the program, Cargill says, is to develop job skills in people with intellectual, motor, visual and hearing disabilities through training. Along with other program participants, Ramirez learned about analysis of disability law and labor law in Venezuela, communication and social skills, leadership, personal development, self-esteem, as well as the Guiding Principles and Policies of Cargill. Ramirez also had the opportunity to take a course on Venezuelan sign language to communicate with her co-workers who are hearing impaired.
Like Ramirez, some of those who successfully completed the Engranados program were offered jobs within Cargill. Other participants of the program may receive offers to work with other multinational companies, including Nestlé, with whom Cargill has formed strategic alliances.

Helping employers recognize and value skills of the millions of people on the spectrum, like Ramirez, is one of the core messages that will be addressed by the Autism Society of Minnesota’s (AuSM) 3rd annual Autism & Employment Forum. This is being hosted by Cargill on Oct. 24, 2013 at its Hopkins, Minn. Campus. Ramirez, who will speak at the upcoming event, will highlight Cargill as one of a growing number of corporations in the U.S. and Europe that is recognizing and capitalizing on the unique skill sets that individuals with autism often possess: excellent long-term memories, high attention to detail and ability to excel at repetitive tasks.

Walgreens, one of the largest drugstore chains in the U.S., also has one of the nation’s largest disability inclusion programs. Its distribution center model, launched in 2007, allowed management and partner organizations to look for people with the right attitude to learn and succeed, including individuals with disabilities, such as ASD.

“We originally went into this project wanting to change the work environment,” said Walgreens senior vice president of supply chain and logistics Randy Lewis, “but soon discovered we were the ones who changed in dramatic and wonderful ways.” Lewis, who was a keynote speaker at the 2012 Autism & Employment Forum, frequently travels around the U.S. to talk about how Walgreens’ management found that with a mix of training, technology and awareness, the active inclusion of individuals with disabilities as workers within its newest generation of distribution centers has helped them operate more efficiently and productively.

In 2012, Walgreens announced that its goal is to fill 20 percent of its distribution center jobs with people with disabilities. Additionally, Walgreens says that more than 100 U.S. and global companies have visited Walgreens to learn how to initiate and sustain similar efforts of inclusion.¹

Walgreens is not alone in the United States in these efforts. Minnesota-based companies 3M, Best Buy, and Medtronic are among top U.S. companies that have committed significant time and resources to exploring how they can best employ individuals on the autism spectrum.

In May of 2013, German software giant, SAP publicly announced the beginning of a campaign to recruit people with ASD as programmers and product testers, drawing on skills such as close attention to detail and the ability to solve complex problems. “Only by employing people who think differently and spark innovation will SAP be prepared to handle the challenges of the 21st century,” said Luisa Delgado, member of the Executive Board of SAP AG, Human Resources, in a release issued by SAP.
As an added motivator for some companies, the U.S. Department of Labor recently proposed a rule requiring federal contractors and subcontractors to have 7 percent of their workforces be comprised of qualified workers with disabilities. A number of states, municipalities, and corporations have begun to explore supplier diversity mandates that will require contractors to demonstrate a minimum level of disability inclusion within their workforce as well.

While efforts by the government and private sectors represent progress, statistics indicate that there is work to be done. According to the Journal of American Academy of Pediatrics, roughly half a million children with autism in the U.S. will reach adulthood in the next decade. This statistic is complicated by the fact that only 33 percent of young adults with autism go on to employment or post-secondary education after completing high school, a statistic that is even lower than the employment rate for individuals with disabilities overall.

“As young people with ASD prepare to leave school and enter the adult world of employment and self-sufficiency, employers are going to have to be prepared to work with this growing sector of our population,” said Jonah Weinberg, AuSM. “Encouraging employers and potential employees to become educated about both the benefits and challenges that will come with their working relationship will be a key to success.”

Because those with ASD may struggle with social interaction, employers and human resource professionals may see what they believe to be challenges during a candidate’s first interview. For example, a candidate may have difficulty maintaining eye contact while speaking, or lack the awareness that they are dominating a conversation.

“But what is more important,” asks Weinberg, “hiring someone who offers a firm handshake and can be quick with a joke, or hiring someone who knows how to engineer the next generation operating system for your company? The handshake can always be taught later.”

One of the decisions that individuals on the autism spectrum must make is whether or not to disclose their diagnosis. And, if they choose to disclose, when is the appropriate time to do so. While a disclosure is necessary to access potential disability accommodations, some individuals feel that a disclosure could hinder their efforts to gain employment in the first place. According to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, people with common mental health conditions have a right to a reasonable accommodation at work under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Still, disclosure remains a personal choice that must be carefully considered.

In cases when an individual chooses to disclose his or her diagnosis, employers and employees are encouraged to work together to help make the work experience successful through a variety of strategies and tactics, including: identifying a co-worker who can act as a mentor for the new employee with ASD; using a job or
social coach to set up visual aids and schedules; having regularly scheduled meetings with the new employee at the end of each work day for feedback; and offering diversity training for the supervisor and the team the person with ASD will be joining.

The responsibility of making the interview and job adjustment a positive experience does not rest solely on the employer. Dr. Barbara Luskin, Ph.D., LP, a licensed psychologist who has worked closely with children and adults with ASD for more than 30 years, encourages her clients to take social skills classes to learn the “soft skills” that are necessary for interviews and for daily social interactions.

These classes help participants learn how to fit into a group, take part in conversations, and ask appropriate questions.

In addition to classes, Luskin says, role playing can be helpful. “Role playing may help an individual with ASD in social interactions with co-workers and communication with supervisors. Practicing different work scenarios may help individuals build self-confidence and become prepared for how to handle unexpected situations.”

These types of skills, along with more specific interviewing and resume writing strategies, will be part of the focus of the Autism & Employment Forum’s Information Fair.
Individuals with autism will have the opportunity to work with WorkForce Centers and Vocational Rehabilitation Services counselors as well as representatives from local university career and diversity offices to participate in job-focused instructional sessions and access information resources.

The Forum’s two presentation sessions will be highlighted by keynote speaker Jon Ander Badiola, President of Cargill Foods Venezuela. Badiola, along with Ramirez, will speak about Cargill’s successful Engranados program and Ramirez’s experience in the program. Local employers and individuals with autism also will speak about their employment journeys.

The Forum will include a leadership summit for senior executives and HR representatives from top Minnesota corporations, state agencies, advocates and individuals with autism.

Scott Badesch, President and CEO of the Autism Society said, “the Employment Forum drew more than 750 employers, families, service providers and individuals impacted by autism. As a professional, I found it heartwarming to see how good work is helping to open so many new doors for so many.”

“As a father of a child with autism, I now hope that the world my adult son will grow up in will be one of kindness and caring for him as an employee.”

More Resources


Resources

AuSM has published two audience-specific employment guides in partnership with the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development and Vocational Rehabilitation Services: “Overlooked Talent: Investing in Employees with Autism”, written for employers by employers on the benefits of hiring individuals with autism; and “Unlocked Potential: An Employment Guide for People with Autism”, written to inspire and motivate individuals with ASD to seek meaningful, successful employment. The DVD series and employment guides are available from AuSM upon request.


References