

How Human Resource Management Can Best Support Employees with Autism: Future Directions for Research and Practice

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The purpose of this paper is to explore the current research and understanding of how an organization's human resource management function may play a role in the employment of individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). First, brief mention is made of the and accompanying symptoms of ASD as they relate to often necessary employment skills. Secondly, the existing literature will be described. Finally, a discussion will be made regarding how the various functions, within human resource management, need to be addressed to provide for a more inclusive environment for individuals with ASD; including areas for future research. While the paper is organized around traditional human resource management roles and responsibilities, the responsibility for effective workplace management, design, and culture needs to be embedded in the entire organization in order to be most effective and supportive.

An estimated 500,000 children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are due to enter the United States workforce in the next decade. Meanwhile, 4 out of 10 young adults with autism never work in their early twenties (Moodie, 2016). Most of the existing research surrounding autism focuses on treatment and causes as it pertains to early diagnosis in young children. Relatively little is known regarding how to support postsecondary success, especially for employment (Hendricks, 2010).

With diagnosis often occurring at a young age, many individuals with ASD are able to get the necessary support they need throughout their schooling. For example, when enrolled in the primary school system, individuals diagnosed with ASD are able to get personal, customized treatment and accommodation to fulfill educational goals. However, once out of secondary school, many individuals with ASD are confronted with the fact that their symptoms are seen as both unfamiliar and even disruptive. A national study conducted in the United States found that among youth with Autism Spectrum Disorders, 34.7% had attended college and 55.1% had held paid employment during their first 6 years out of high school (Shattuck et al., 2012). That same study also reported that more than 50% of the youth who left high school within the past 2 years had no participation in employment. This research illustrates the challenge that while individuals with ASD can often obtain and reach educational goals, they struggle to obtain and maintain employment. Employment options for those with ASD include supported or competitive employment. In some cases, supported employment for individuals with ASD can provide an environment that promotes self-confidence and has been shown to improve cognitive performance (Hendricks, 2010). Supported employment often involves some degree of formal training for employment preparedness, job matching according to abilities and individual propensities, and ongoing support in the workplace (often by a vocational rehabilitation professional) (Nicholas et al., 2015). Regardless of whether an individual with ASD receives vocational rehabilitation support in an employment setting, there are many ways an organization can address becoming a more inclusive environment for those with ASD.

Most developed countries have national legislation aimed to prevent employment discrimination for people with disabilities, including ASD. For example, in the United States, there is the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) and its amendments. The act is designed to prohibit discrimination and ensure equal opportunity for persons with disabilities in employment, state and local government services, public accommodations, commercial facilities, and transportation. This requires employers to hire the most qualified applicants, regardless of their disability, and must provide reasonable accommodations when necessary. However, many developed countries are still in the beginning stages of legislation that addresses support for those with autism spectrum disorder. In 2013, The Scottish Parliament adopted a 10-year plan to improve support for individuals with autism, however, only one recommendation addressed the issue of employment (McKiernan, 2013). Like the United States, most other countries remain in the beginning stages of research and data collection when it comes to how to employ and accommodate the specific population of individuals with ASD. New legislation in the United States, The Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act of 2014, requires a collaborative workforce system which engages and serves businesses that want to understand more about the benefits of hiring and maintaining individuals with disabilities. Hopefully employers will consider the unique skills and abilities of individuals with autism in their efforts.

Autism Spectrum Disorder

Currently, it is estimated that 1 in 88 children in the United States has autism

spectrum disorder. A decade ago only 1 in 49 children had the disorder. This increase can be attributed to better diagnosis, as well as broader definitions of what constitutes autism spectrum disorder (Norton, 2012). According to the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, ASD is a group of developmental brain disorders that can cause significant social, communication, and behavioral challenges. Since May 2013, psychiatrists and psychologists have been using the 5th edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) to diagnose individuals with these types of developmental disorders. Autism spectrum disorder, as defined in the DSM-5 (299.0, F84.0), contains an outlined list of diagnostic criteria including persistent deficits in social communication and interaction, restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior, and hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory input or unusual interests in sensory aspects of the environment. The DSM-5 further defines severity levels for autism spectrum disorder ranging from Level 1 to Level 3. Level 1 on the autism spectrum scale requires support and is defined as noticeable impairments within a social setting coupled with a decreased interest in social interactions. These types of individuals can display an inflexibility of behavior causing significant interference with functioning. Level 3 on the Autism Spectrum scale requires substantial support and is defined as severe deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication skills, causing severe impairments in functioning. Individuals at Level 3 are very limited in social interaction and have extreme difficulty coping with change. However, with the correct diagnosis and the right amount of support, individuals with ASD often have the ability to engage in all of life's activities, including paid employment.

Hiring employees with ASD can be of mutual benefit for both the individual and the company. Individuals that are higher functioning have often achieved educational success (i.e., a college education), are technologically astute (have high interests and abilities with both technology and data) and can become productive employees with the right environment and training. Once employed, these individuals often demonstrate a fine attention to detail and intense focus resulting in increased work output (Hendricks, 2010). This specific population has a unique set of skills that continue to be masked by their social, communication, and behavioral challenges. It is crucial to remember that employees with autism spectrum disorder do not always pick up on social norms. Tasks a neurotypical individual (someone without ASD) would consider "common sense," don't always make as much sense to those with ASD. For example, in situations of heightened anxiety, an individual with ASD may exhibit physical or verbal ticks that could be disruptive, or even deemed unacceptable in a traditional working environment. While that individual may know that removing themselves from the situation by taking a break or performing a self-soothing activity (e.g., rocking in a chair or walking) may help, neither are always available nor possible. As described, the impact of ASD can affect social skills, verbal communication, and challenges with managing change. These are skills often deemed necessary in an employment setting and especially in any opportunities requiring managerial responsibilities; these deficiencies can create significant barriers for successful employment.

Previous Research

With the rate of individuals who have an autism spectrum disorder growing

exponentially, postsecondary support studies are receiving increased attention. However, this research often has a rather limited sample size and is focused on anecdotal examples of how various individuals succeed at work. The focus is often geared toward vocational rehabilitation practitioners or autism scholars in order to guide their work to support and secure employment for individuals with ASD in supported work environments (e.g., Chappel & Somers, 2010; Garcia-Villamizar, Ross, & Wehman, 2000; Hendricks, 2010). Often the research on those with autism has focused on sheltered work (e.g., Evert et al., 2012) which is often the norm for individuals with ASD. It has limited generalizability due to its small sample size. For instance, one study of three individuals with ASD demonstrated an increase in work performance when given extensive training prior to the position (Burke et al., 2010). Another study of two different individuals with autism identified an increase in productivity and independence when supported by a Positive Behavior Support Facilitator, one through technology, and the other through an actual mentor. (Ham et al., 2014). Based on the existing research and a recent literature review focused on employment trends for individuals with ASD (Chen et al., 2015), it is clear that vocational support can be useful for the workplace inclusion of individuals with autism spectrum disorder. Chen et al.'s (2015) evaluation outlines future clinical practices for professionals working in this field but ignored how organizations may need to be shaped in order to create more inclusive environments. While these studies can introduce the challenges in providing support to these individuals to secure and maintain employment, the employment issue should also be considered from the organizational perspective. With recent legislation targeted toward eliminating sheltered workshops (where individuals work in isolated environments and often receive below minimum wage), organizations must become more supportive both of creating employment opportunities for those with ASD as well as scholars conducting meaningful research.

The management literature is beginning to examine how to employ people with disabilities. There are several examples that focus on removing employment barriers (e.g., Kulkarni & Lengnick-Hall, 2014; Lengnick-Hall, Gaunt, & Kulkarni, 2008) and learning about employee experiences with requesting any needed accommodation (e.g., Baumgärtner et al., 2015) or disclosure (e.g., von Schrader, Malzer, & Bruyère, 2014) but this research often ignores the unique challenges of employing those with ASD. Bruyère, Erickson, and VanLooy (2000) conducted a study that dealt with issues in the employment provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The results of the study revealed that employers are responding to their respective disability nondiscrimination legislation by making accommodations needed by applicants and employees with disabilities. Bruyère et al. (2000) based their analysis on the notion that the implication of the employment provisions of this legislation largely falls in the realm of human resource management professionals. However, many individuals often don't request needed accommodation during the application process (e.g., inability to use technology for online applications/employment tests, building accessibility for interviews) or even once they are hired. The ability to create an inclusive work environment may begin with the traditional functions of human resource management, regardless of legal mandate.

There are two recent management studies that focus on the unique challenges for

those with ASD in the workplace, both by Johnson and Joshi (2014, 2016). Their research has focused on the role of disclosure for those with ASD, as well as how the age of diagnosis may impact workplace experiences (Johnson & Joshi, 2014, 2016). Their research illustrates how the context of employment can impact an individual's success and employment experiences. The lessons presented here can also be used to create more inclusive workplace environments for those with other cognitive or social disabilities.

Implications for Human Resource Management Responsibilities

Within any organization, it is often the human resource management function that defines and administers programs and policies aimed at addressing the functional areas of managing human capital. The following sections present human resource management considerations for both research and practice to create a more inclusive environment for individuals with ASD. Table 1 outlines these various functions in light of what human resource professionals need to consider, areas to review to ensure an inclusive workplace for job applicants and employees with ASD and research questions future scholars may want to examine to generate a better understanding of what these individuals may need to be successful in securing and maintaining employment.

It is important to note that in the following discussion there are many examples of modifications to human resource practices that could be deemed amenable to issues of universal design. Universal design employs principles that redesign space or processes that can have a positive impact on many individuals, not just those with a disability. For example, automatic door openers (designed to assist those who may have mobility issues impacting their ability to open a door) can benefit able-bodied individuals who may need assistance in opening a heavy door. Computer screen reader programs are designed for those with visual impairments but may be helpful for those without visual impairments.

Recruitment

Any organization must have programs in place to create a suitable applicant pool for open positions. In today's workplace, this often includes electronic procedures for both application management and advertising jobs. Most organizations use current job descriptions to create postings for advertising their job opportunities. Both the description and posting should include simple language to make it easy to understand what are the required skills, basic job duties, and instructions on how to apply.

Sourcing Candidates

When sorting through large numbers of employment applications, any organization needs to determine if their sourcing strategy is inclusive to job applicants with ASD.

Table 1: *Human Resource Management Areas to Consider to Address the Employment of Individuals with ASD*

Function	Areas to Consider	Organizational Activities	Research Questions
Recruitment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sourcing Candidates Application Process Interview Process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Are your sourcing activities inclusive of individuals with ASD? Is the application process non-discriminatory? Does your application present a legal conflict for those needing support to complete the process? What screening methods could be employed to minimize applicant anxiety and determine candidate qualifications (i.e. moving beyond the interview)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How do individuals with ASD secure competitive (non-supported) employment? What are the recruitment best practices to expand the candidate pool to adults with ASD? What alternative screening methods are effective for applicants with ASD?
Retention & Performance Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Orientation Onboarding Mentoring Work Schedule Task breakdown Co-worker training Performance management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Deliver materials in a more personalized manner or prior to beginning of employment Make sure a suitable mentor is assigned and available Communicate directions and expectations in hard copy. Examine the tasks related to performance evaluation and essential job duties 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examine how novel practices predict job performance, turnover and retention measures for individuals with ASD?
Total Rewards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Motivation Incentive Pay Benefits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determine proper career paths and rewards for employees (inclusive of those with ASD) Gather resources available to share with employees with ASD to manage any benefit coordination with government support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Examine longitudinally how various total rewards systems address the needs of employees with ASD?
Health & Safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workplace (space and noise level) Work Schedule/Breaks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How to create an inclusive environment through office design? How to define an appropriate work schedule that adheres to appropriate labor laws and perhaps the ADA? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How the adjustments made to an organization's workplace impacts both individuals with and without ASD? How might non-standard work requests relate to the role of disclosure and accommodation under the ADA?

Often companies utilize overly specific job descriptions to develop job postings and this can eliminate the opportunity for an individual with ASD to even be considered for a position. While neurotypical individuals may apply (even to positions where they may or may not broadly meet the criteria), individuals with ASD often interpret the language in a job posting literally and may not apply if they do not meet only one of several defined criteria (which could be desired rather than required). As mentioned earlier, many individuals with ASD are highly skilled in terms of technology and detail oriented tasks. Organizations need to consider if the job application process, locations of position postings, and general recruiting tactics are inclusive for those with ASD. In addition, the Dandelion Effect also suggests to “design jobs to maximize potential for particular individuals to create value” (Austin & Sonne, 2014). Instead of rewording job descriptions, restructuring the job as a whole in a way that showcases their skill sets to create value can be very beneficial. This strategy helps create value through innovation and it also helps give these individuals with ASD opportunities for long-term positions that are tailored to their skills. The biggest issue in hiring these individuals can be their lack of work experience. Creating positions that provide training and do not require a substantial amount of previous experience can increase the candidate pool.

Application Process

Recruiting individuals with autism is a difficult task considering the limitations under the ADA. Being that applicants are not required to disclose their disabilities, interviewers are given the daunting task of assuming no accommodations are needed. So how does a company come to provide reasonable accommodations for an individual if they do not know what accommodations are needed? The many grey areas of hiring an individual with ASD are left to the Human Resources department to decide. One of the biggest sources of protection for this department is through the application itself. Every application requires the applicant to “sign here”, declaring all information to be true as well as guaranteeing they have the mental and legal capacity to sign. Often times, individuals with ASD lack the legal capacity to be able to sign any legal documents themselves, and therefore require a parent or another individual to act as their legal guardian. In these cases, the individual will have to take the application home to get signed or their signature is void. If the signature is void, the company is not liable for hiring the individual since it was under false pretense.

In addition, applications and resumes can be somewhat of a struggle for those with ASD. Tailoring a resume to fit a specific employer's needs can be a difficult task for many people, disabled or not (Wilczynski, Trammel, & Clarke, 2013). Gaining experience in any field has also proven an incredibly difficult task for applicants with autism spectrum disorder. Focusing on the overall skill set rather than experience will prove most beneficial, especially when hiring individuals with ASD. One challenge for organizations interested in expanding their applicant pool for those with ASD is the legal restriction of sourcing candidates based on a disability or other protected class status. While an organization cannot include criteria that candidates with specific disabilities are preferred, the organization can work to create a positive work climate for those with ASD by shaping itself to highlight inclusiveness for all individuals, regardless of a disability. Developing community partnerships with organizations

that may be connected to the regional autism community is another way to expand the applicant pool. For example, sponsoring a resume workshop or attending a job fair where individuals with ASD may be looking for jobs is another way to develop a reputation as an inclusive work organization.

Interview Process

Many individuals with autism struggle in social environments, especially high-stress situations. One of the biggest obstacles is the hiring process itself. Interviewing candidates requires a great deal of social interaction and communication that is often lacking in adults with autism (Hendricks, 2010). It is very difficult for a Human Resources Manager to get to know the strengths and skills of a candidate when they are put in an uncomfortable, strenuous environment. Regular structured interviews can be very intimidating and elicit feelings of discomfort and nervousness, creating opportunities for the individual to emotionally shut down. Instead of utilizing standard interviews, there are other alternatives that can help keep these interviewees calm and relaxed, while still getting to know the individual. For example, conducting a company walk through while interviewing can help put the candidate at ease and distract them from the interview itself. Visual aids and fidgets can also provide a discussion while the interviewer asks questions. Thorkil Sonne, CEO of Specialisterne utilizes Legos as a useful tool to assist in analyzing candidates. “I realized I needed a tool they would be comfortable with. We found that Legos could be used as a tool to identify their thought processes” (Saran, 2008). Many individuals struggle with structured interviews, so adapting to their needs is extremely important in gaining a better understanding as to what skills they do and do not possess.

Retention and Performance Management

Once an organization determines that it would like to modify its employment practices to become more inclusive to employees with ASD, there are several adjustments both to the onboarding process as well as the workplace that should be considered. These are crucial not only for providing immediate success for these individuals, but also for creating an environment that can reduce unnecessary turnover or performance problems after hiring is complete.

Orientation Process

Large crowds of unfamiliar people can be overwhelming to anybody. For individuals with ASD, these large groups are most often intimidating and uncomfortable. When conducting an orientation for a newly hired employee with an autism spectrum disorder, exploring alternative orientation programs (designed for more individual attention) can be very beneficial. For example, providing a private one-on-one orientation option for all employees can ensure that the onboarding or orientation program is well understood and designed for everyone’s benefit (regardless of ASD). In addition, setting aside time during normal orientation to take the new hire on a private tour of the facilities to discuss questions and concerns can also help a new employee become acclimated with their surroundings and eliminate any potential discomfort.

Little things like introducing them to their supervisor and privately defining job tasks can support a smooth transition into new positions.

For most new employees, there can be an extensive amount of pre-hire paperwork that must be completed. Employees often have to complete the necessary tax forms, review the employee handbook, and complete benefit enrollment paperwork. Individuals with ASD may find the decision making and volume of information overwhelming so distributing any handouts for review prior to the first employment meeting is another tactic that can be used to provide a more welcoming climate to those with ASD.

Mentor

One strategy that has proven helpful to any new hire is to assign the employee a mentor. In doing so, the individual has someone to turn to when any sort of question or concern arises. Utilizing a mentor allows an employee with ASD to have someone they can consider a friend or point of contact during employment. Often times, employees do not consider it appropriate to turn to their immediate supervisors with initial questions. Therefore, utilizing a mentor can help to eliminate the opportunity for unanswered questions and concerns that could negatively impact job performance. In addition to answering questions, mentors can also assist in defining work tasks and social norms. While that is typically the responsibility of the supervisor, it can also be that of the mentor. Oftentimes these individuals experience frustration over their inability to understand certain tasks or coworkers (Wilczynski et al., 2013). Utilizing a mentor who can reiterate directions and support their mentee through social interactions can decrease discomfort for an employee with ASD immensely. Having a mentor tasked to guide an employee with ASD creates an inclusive environment and promotes a team mentality. Mentors who are a part of the work environment have been found to increase social skills for an employee with ASD (Wilczynski et al., 2013).

Organization of Work Schedule and Tasks

Difficulty in picking up on social norms is challenging to those with autism spectrum disorders. Many tasks considered to be “common sense” to most are not usually apparent to the majority of individuals with ASD. Those with ASD thrive in a setting where communication is direct and in writing. In some cases, written instructions may not be appropriate due to a lack of reading comprehension. The use of pictures to illustrate a task would be most effective in such situations; frequently verbal directions and cues are forgotten. With all the hustle and bustle of a work environment, it is easy for one to forget certain steps or become frustrated when minute details are forgotten. Step-by-step written/pictorial directions work extremely well considering the autonomy it allows in order to reference when necessary. Because of the literal nature of employees with ASD, they may need to be invited to extend themselves socially (e.g., lunches, breaks) and even be reminded to take scheduled breaks in their workday.

Once an employee has gone through the orientation process and is settling in, the day-to-day work week can begin. Expectations and guidelines have been communicated and the employee is ready to hit the ground running. However,

communication should not stop there. Thorkil Sonne describes the need for continuous communication: “It’s also about setting expectations when it comes to management style and adjusting behaviors, such as not using irony or sarcasm-saying what you mean and meaning what you say” (Dobson, 2013). These employees are very motivated to work, but don’t always understand the social norms and expectations surrounding an office environment. Often times, management styles need to be altered to better accommodate these employees and their understanding of company policies and guidelines. In addition to the day-to-day communication, organizational change should be proceeded with caution around these employees. Repetition and routine are very comforting to individuals with ASD. It is important to implement change with caution. Communicating change before it happens and keeping an eye on anxiety levels is crucial and continuous communication is key.

Coworker Training

The success of an employee with ASD can hinge on compassionate coworkers and immediate supervisors to provide a supportive environment. “Employment retention may require flexibility and tolerance from individuals who supervise, interact, or collaborate with the person with ASD.” (Hendricks, 2010, p. 129). In order to provide such an environment, knowledge of the disorder as well as what job supports are needed are excellent ways to prepare coworkers. Training all employees as to what they can expect is critical in creating an inclusive environment that promotes comfort and support. It may be necessary to have a source of continued support or guidance for those who interact with the employee with ASD to address any unique challenges posed into the workplace. This source of support could be a resource for continued interpersonal and team building, beneficial for all members of an organizational team handling a unique or challenging situation.

Performance Management

When hiring an individual with ASD, it is important to frame this initiative in light of the organization’s human capital strategy. If the organization’s strategy is to be more inclusive, then it is in the company’s best interest to continue to help these employees grow through the performance management process. One suggestion from the Dandelion Effect is to redesign work conditions in order to adjust to the talents and skills of a company’s workforce. This way a company is significantly increasing the amount of value its people create in such a way that far exceeds the overall costs of the changes themselves (Austin & Sonne, 2014). Creating an inclusive, knowledgeable workforce is difficult. Employees with ASD bring a lot to the table when it comes to having a differentiated skill set. The function of performance management may need to be revisited to determine if the necessary criteria are being appropriately evaluated relative to the job description. For example, what is the role of interpersonal communication in the job duties? This could be an area where an employee with ASD could prove deficient, however, what is the relative value on that skill in relation to overall performance? Once the employee with ASD and their coworkers adjust to new means of communicating, these deficiencies may not even exist; a new normal may develop for the entire workgroup.

Supported Employment

Many companies utilize job coaches in order to provide substantial support for their employees with ASD. Job coaches can be used either for short- or long-term support with varying levels of hours, depending on the individual and organizational needs. In doing so, these employees are able to work independently as much as possible while being accommodated in the areas of most trouble such as social interactions. Garcia-Villamizar and Hughes (2007) found a positive correlation between supported employment and the cognitive performance of those employees with ASD. Utilizing job coaches through a vocational program allows these employees to be consistently monitored and supported without a negative impact on company time. Job coaches often range from full-time assistance to part-time, conducting weekly visits in order to provide the adequate assistance preferred by both the company and the employees.

The use of a job coach raises some organizational concerns and clear integration challenges for those employees needing this support. For example, how does an organization measure employee performance if the individual is utilizing a job coach? Who manages the relationship between the individual and the job coach? How is the workplace impacted by an additional resource to support this individual in their work performance? The challenge is creating an organization that can be flexible with this relationship as well as be open to this experience. If an organization is to be an inclusive workplace, then the presence of a job coach may not seem odd to the employment setting. The job coach could also serve to help educate the organizational community on how to best work with the individual in this work setting (beyond the initial training described earlier).

Total Rewards

Motivation

Motivating employees to remain productive on a daily basis can prove a difficult task, regardless of being on the autism spectrum. However, providing employees with exceptional compensation packages based on individual merit is a strategy utilized by many companies seeking to encourage superior performance (going above and beyond the basic job duties). One major challenge for organizations utilizing this type of incentive pay is that for individuals with ASD they do not always understand the subtleties of exceptional performance. In their often literal world, they may not seek and develop those type of responsibilities or consider monetary rewards in relation to job performance. The ability to work and perform a job is often the necessary motivation an employee with ASD requires to perform their job well. In their literal world, poor performance would more likely result from improper instruction or lack of ability, rather than poor motivation. Therefore, as with any individual, it is important to consider in the performance management process how each employee is motivated. For example, an employee with ASD may not be motivated to advance up the career ladder (which often includes increased interpersonal and management responsibilities). They may however, want new skills or tasks that are relevant to their interests and abilities, regardless of a promotion. Many organizations are using alternative career paths (i.e., based on technical skills rather than an interest in increasing management

responsibilities) and individuals with ASD would be good candidates for such a promotion system. Additionally, opportunities for training should be checked to ensure they are accessible to employees with ASD. For example, online training may be a great option for an employee with ASD to develop additional skills.

Benefits

Most employees in full-time jobs receive benefits, medical or otherwise. Depending on an individual's level of functioning as well as financial situation, their benefit needs may vary differently than the neurotypical workforce. One thing all of these employees have in common is that benefits which are comprehensive to address overall health (both physical and mental) would be desirable for the entire workforce. Employees with ASD might just have to manage how employer provided benefits may accompany government benefits as appropriate. While an employer should not have to manage that balance, they should be able to provide an employee with ASD the resources to help self-manage that challenge and ensure their overall health care benefits are not in conflict.

Health and Safety

Office Layout

Office layout is very important. As defined by the DSM-5, one diagnostic criteria of an individual with autism spectrum disorder is to have a hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory input such as apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, and visual fascination with lights or movement. High noise levels and uncomfortable lighting can make individuals with ASD very uncomfortable. Therefore, sound volumes that seem normal to those not on the spectrum, may be extremely uncomfortable for employees with ASD.

Communicating the location of bathrooms and quiet areas is especially helpful when accommodating employees with ASD. Maintaining quiet areas for these individuals to utilize has proven very beneficial to their comfort and safety. Often times individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder experience sensory overload where they become overwhelmed. Providing such an environment could help to eliminate any feelings of anxiety and discomfort. Many organizations now have private spaces for nursing mothers or personal breaks (given the new trend in more open office layouts). These existing areas can be utilized by employees with ASD when they may need to be alone to deal with sensory overload.

Breaks

When it comes to providing reasonable accommodation, one of the biggest issues is the amount of breaks that are acceptable for a person to take on a daily basis. Feelings of being overwhelmed are commonplace for individuals with ASD. While allowing for breaks is completely acceptable, it is also important to communicate the use of excessive breaks. Many of these individuals have never had the opportunity to be employed. It is not an issue of abusing a privilege, but of not knowing a privilege is being abused. When hiring an individual with ASD, it is crucial to work together to develop a reasonable

accommodation plan that is comfortable for both the employee and their supervisor. Once a plan has been accepted by both parties, continuous review and communication will help to reduce opportunity for abusing such a privilege. The issue of employee scheduled breaks may raise the question of reasonable accommodation as well. If a modified work schedule is requested on the grounds of reasonable accommodation (under the ADA) then that individual will have to disclose their disability (often this is administered through a third party vendor). If an individual requests a modified break schedule, this will have to be considered in light of a reasonable accommodation under the ADA.

Implications

When it comes to today's workforce, it is rather obvious each employee brings a different set of skills to the table. Individuals with autism spectrum disorder are no different. Many of these individuals are high functioning and motivated to work when given the opportunity. According to the article, "People with Autism Ready to Work," Thorkil Sonne stated that, "a lot of people with autism have an attention to detail, a good memory and a very structured way of thinking and working. They like the repetitive elements in jobs and some are very creative, finding new solutions to existing ways of doing things" (Dobson, 2013). Sonne, as the founder of Specialisterne, hires individuals with ASD to work alongside business consultants on tasks like software testing, programming, and data entry. Today, about 75% of Specialisterne's skilled employees have some form of Autism Spectrum Disorder (Austin & Sonne, 2014). Through effective assessment and training, Specialisterne has been able to successfully comprehend what employees can accomplish and how to sustain a comfort zone in which they can excel. Sonne and Specialisterne have been able to foster an extremely productive work environment by adapting their management style and designing a work environment from the employee's perspectives (Austin & Sonne, 2014). Sonne is one of the few business owners to successfully utilize this population to a competitive advantage.

Adults with ASD may struggle with social interaction skills, but they excel with attention to detail, persistence, and strict compliance with instructions. With the right training and support, these individuals have the potential to be incredibly reliable employees who take pride in their work. There has been some recent research on the role of leadership in the employment success of individuals on the spectrum (e.g., Parr, Hunter, & Ligon's, 2013; Parr & Hunter, 2014). Parr and Hunter's (2014) interview study of 54 employees with ASD illustrates how organizational leadership must be sensitive to the style necessary for these workers' overall performance success. An organization's human resource management function can both guide leadership and workplace practices to provide a supportive workplace for adults with ASD.

Scholars interested in the effectiveness of these activities should work to generate meaningful findings. Future research should utilize larger sample sizes or include individuals in a variety of work settings. Studies should compare and contrast how an organization designed to be inclusive of employees with ASD impacts their neurotypical workforce. Experimental research using individuals with ASD could begin

to examine how differences in traditional human resource management practices will impact attitudes, experiences, and intentions to stay or leave an organization. While there has not been much evidence historically that federal legislation (specifically the ADA) plays a role in encouraging organizations to employ individuals with ASD, the Workforce Innovation Opportunity Act of 2014 should be studied for its organizational mandates regarding the employment of people with disabilities, specifically working-age adults with ASD.

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