

FORETHOUGHT CONVERSATION

Entrepreneur Thorkil Sonne on what you can learn from employees with autism

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Four years ago Thorkil Sonne realized that his young autistic son possessed an extraordinary memory and a remarkable eye for detail. Those traits are prevalent among people with autism, and Sonne saw an opportunity to help individuals with the disorder find productive employment. As the technical director of a Danish software venture, he knew those qualities were critical in software testers. So he went out on his own and launched Specialisterne, a Copenhagen-based software-testing firm that now has 51 employees, including 37 with autism, and revenues of \$2 million.

You started your company to improve the lives of people with autism. Why not just create a nonprofit focused on research or job training?

I wanted to do more than just provide a sheltered workplace for people with a disability. My goal is to create opportunities for people with autism on an international scale. You might find money to support sheltered working environments in Scandinavia but not in Poland or Spain or Brazil. To extend its reach, our organization needs the kind of funding that only a profit-making venture can generate. It must succeed on market terms.

Is it hard to reconcile two missions—serving customers and aiding people with a disability?

We're constantly asked whether we support customers or a cause. We want to do both, of course, but we're always fighting against the suspicion that we're just a charity. Our corporate social responsibility profile might open doors with CEOs, but executives in charge of software testing aren't evaluated on CSR, only on getting the most for the company's money. To wipe away their suspicions, we must exceed performance expectations every time.

All our business comes from the private sector. Because Denmark has no tradition of social enterprises, the government doesn't earmark

contracts for companies like ours or give them tax breaks. We have to compete head on.

How does managing autistic workers differ from managing other people?

Most of our consultants with autism have a mild form called Asperger's and are high functioning. Still, because they're often hypersensitive to noise, they can be uncomfortable in open-concept office spaces without doors or walls. They also have trouble working in teams and understanding social cues, such as gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice. You have to be precise and direct with them, be very specific about your expectations, and avoid sarcasm and nonverbal communication. Though we expect employees to do their jobs well, we don't ask them to excel socially or to interact all the time with others. We just find them the right role. That takes tremendous stress off them. I think normality is whatever the majority decides it will be, and in our company people with autism are the norm.

What about the relationships between customers and your autistic consultants?

About 70% of our work is done at customer sites. The customer appoints a contact—someone who's good with special people, who will select the right tasks and a comfortable place for them. We also give our clients a short introduction to autism and to our firm's unique culture. After working with our consultants, the customers start being more direct with their own colleagues and stating their expectations more clearly. That's helped them improve in an area that many companies struggle with.

In what other ways might firms benefit by adopting your techniques for managing autistic employees?

Companies sometimes unknowingly employ autistic people because the condition often goes undiagnosed. But people with autism

aren't the only employees who don't thrive in open offices or in the traditional management system, with its emphasis on teamwork and unclear instructions like "Figure out on your own how to deal with this."

You have to get the most from employees, especially when labor is scarce. Our sector is crying out for manpower, but Specialisterne has many job seekers knocking on the door.

The key is to find situations that fit employees' personalities and ambitions, not force everybody into one mold. That just causes stress, and workplaces already produce too much of that.

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