



## **Neurodiversity: From the Classroom to the Workplace A Whitepaper**

Neurodiversity is an approach to learning and disability that suggests that diverse neurological conditions appear as a result of normal variations in the human genome.<sup>1</sup> This neologism originated in the late 1990s as a challenge to prevailing views of neurological diversity as inherently pathological, instead asserting that neurological differences should be recognized and respected as a social category on a par with gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability status.

There is a neurodiversity movement, which is an international civil rights movement that has the autism rights movement as its most influential sub-movement. This movement frames autism, bipolarity and other neurotypes as a natural human variation rather than a pathology or disorder, and its advocates reject the idea that neurological differences need to be (or can be) cured, as they believe them to be authentic forms of human diversity, self-expression, and being.<sup>2</sup>

Previous efforts from neurodiversity programs have demonstrated that:

- Students and employees given the opportunity to pursue college degrees in competitive fields are able to successfully complete the needed coursework.
- However, many students graduate from college or even graduate school with little to no experience in competitive employment prior to graduation.
- To better prepare students for the employment setting common employers need students to have employment and on the job training experience throughout high school and college so they are prepared for careers in their field of choice.
- Collaborations between schools, employers and state/county systems of support can be used to facilitate such opportunities.

This whitepaper is offered as an overview of the two thrusts of programming at the Arc of Philadelphia – one that focuses on teacher training, and a second that concentrates on building partnerships with employers to promote neurodiversity in the workplace. The two sections that

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<sup>1</sup> "[Autism as a Natural Human Variation: Reflections on the Claims of the Neurodiversity Movement](#)". Linköping University.

<sup>2</sup> Definition of Neurodiversity: Background. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neurodiversity>. Retrieved December 30, 2015.

follow describe the components of each effort separately. A concluding section outlines the challenges that the disability community must overcome to link these efforts together and maximize the opportunity for all of us.

### **From The Classroom...**

In 2015, The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) commissioned The Arc of Philadelphia to create a training program, specifically oriented to the needs of high school administrators, secondary transition coordinators and vocational rehabilitation staff. The primary objective of the training program has been to familiarize educational professionals to the opportunities arising in the private sector, and to help them bring specific tools to bear to help youth with autism take advantage of emerging opportunities in the employment market.

During the course of 2016, The Arc of Philadelphia brought together specialists from various fields and leveraged its ongoing collaboration with SAP, the global leader in enterprise software, to develop a comprehensive curriculum in support of this effort. The team developed more than twenty modules, all based on a specific pedagogical framework that evolved from ongoing work with PDE, SAP, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation (OVR) as well as other governmental agencies and service provider collaborators.

As of the end of 2016, the program has accomplished most of its initial objectives, including:

- Eight trainings for educators and vocational rehabilitation staff
- Development of one day training in collaboration with SAP and OVR
- Curriculum development of over 40 hours of materials
- Helped to coordinate locations and time frames for trainings
- Management of project in collaboration with partners

Our goal was to provide direct training to 400 participants, and achieve a measured improvement in their knowledge and awareness of employment models that account for and promote neurodiversity was exceeded and we anticipate around 600 participants will benefit directly from the training. We will continue to deploy evaluation methods (quantitative, qualitative) before and after the training sessions to allow participants to give feedback on the sessions and quantify, where possible, the shift in their understanding and awareness of these programs.

We have delivered a total of eight trainings at PaTTAN King of Prussia, PaTTAN Harrisburg, PaTTAN Pittsburgh, Souderton High School, State College Transition Conference, State College Autism Conference, Wilkes Barra, and Philadelphia. The primary target for these training sessions has been educators, administrators, and vocational rehabilitation staff directly involved in shaping secondary transition programs and workforce initiatives within public school districts.

The Arc of Philadelphia has established a template for this training program through its work with SAP and other leading companies in the Philadelphia area. Out of this work we have developed training materials and produce a booklet for use during the training session with leading experts in the autism field. The booklets contain practical materials, including:

- Checklists
- Communication tools
- Resource list
- Practical guides to assist in problem solving (i.e. self disclosure, understanding hidden curriculum, etc.)
- Materials to share with local employers and stakeholders

These materials have been made available to all educational institutions within the Commonwealth of PA and are also open for use by any other interested party.

### **...To The Workplace**

The unemployment crisis in the disability is well documented, and extends from the limited capacity available in today's education system to support robust secondary transition programs. Tens of thousands of talented individuals in the country are excluded from employment opportunities because they have Autism or a related spectrum disorder. This disability often distracts employers from recognizing the technical and professional skills an individual might bring to the workplace. Employers are also generally unaware of the transformative opportunity that workforce diversity can offer their organization: individuals with disabilities can enrich a workplace, provide different perspectives, promote stronger ties among employees, help forge broader connections with the community, and increase success with customers.

The Arc of Philadelphia has taken a leadership role in bringing this opportunity to our region and beyond. Our goal is to help build a coalition of companies, governmental agencies and not for profit corporations who are willing to commit to inclusive hiring practices and identify employment opportunities for people with Autism and related spectrum disorders.

Over the course of the last three years, we have successfully supported SAP, the global leader in enterprise software, as a training partner for their "Autism At Work" project. This effort represents the global best practice in promoting workplace diversity, and we are honored that SAP chose The Arc to develop and deliver training programs for its employees and managers at the company's US headquarters in Newtown Square, PA in support of this initiative.

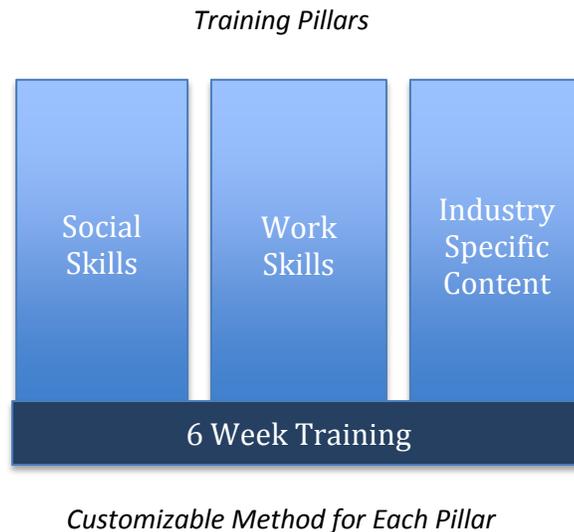
The team achieved the following objectives:

- Recruitment of more than 120 candidates with Autism and demonstrated technical potential to contribute to the SAP workplace
- Placed 24 candidates into successful employment
- 100% retention rate over three years
- 20 paid internships
- 40 active candidates currently in placement process
- 70 candidates trained

The work with SAP has served as a springboard, allowing us to expand our reach to more than a dozen employers in the region, and helping us establish partnerships with schools and

Universities throughout our area to refine our materials and expand our candidate recruitments efforts across the disability community.

Our core effort has been to develop a workplace training program specifically for individuals with disabilities that is built around the following learning constructs:



Our ongoing work with SAP and other companies has generally proceeded along the following order of activities:

*Recruitment by Provider.* Developing a pipeline of potential employees and cultivating needed relationships in the first step in the formal execution of the program. Once the job opportunities are defined, the team will identify channels for outreach.

*Provider Coordination with VR.* Vocational Rehabilitation resources are best access by the local provider. Potential resources for individual candidates can be identified to cover training and job coaching.

*One-Day Workshop Assessment.* During the one-day workshop, the team gathers all of the candidates and works with them in a team setting to assess their skills and capabilities. We present the pool of candidates with brief problem solving challenges to determine skills, stress management, independence, and communication. Assessments from this workshop are used to align individual skills with specific job opportunities, and identify potential barriers to success for each individual.

*Social Skills Training.* Candidates begin with a Social Skills for the workplace training, setting the groundwork and expectations for employment in a professional environment. Crucial skills for the workplace are explored to create self-awareness and personalized tools for managing stress, communication, team work and create a professional plan for long term success. Components can be revisited throughout the remaining training and on boarding process based on the needs of the individuals.

*Work Skills and Industry Specific Training.* The materials present a series of guided challenges, work skills discussion, and industry-specific learning to provide visibility and assessment for candidates and a foundational knowledge of industry acumen.

*Employer Reviews Candidates.* The employer then reviews each candidate with post-training assessment to determine job placement based on input from training.

*Employee On Boarding.* HR enrollment, introduction to work team/colleagues, introduction to on-site supports including provider supports.

*Employment.* Candidates usually receive VR-funded job coaching and support from local provider.

To date, we have built formal partnerships with more than a dozen regional employers in the Philadelphia region to expand the work at SAP and to leverage the ongoing collaboration with PDE on improving and targeting the secondary transition process.

### ***Bridging the Classroom and the Workplace: Future Opportunities and Challenges***

The future is about sharing best practices and translating success from one domain to another, allowing the work from the classroom to echo into the workplace and back. At the same time, none of the programs we have developed nor the others of which we are aware appear mature enough to draw generalizable conclusions. Given the unique challenges of establishing neurodiversity as a principle in such a diverse range of organizations, it is possible that general principles are impractical and that, much like a craftsperson approaching a specific project or opportunity, each engagement in the classroom or workplace will offer unique moments that contribute to the alchemy of broad culture change.

To that end, we are focusing on the opportunities available to us as practitioners and advocates, which include:

- Leverage communities of practice to foster collaborations to connect systems, such as governmental programs, not for profit institutions, and corporate partners. Examples

include efforts to link the Workforce Investment Board (WIB) and Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) programs available through the Department of Labor with employers and educational institutions. This effort requires active participation at the local, state and national level and across institutional boundaries, educating professionals in each of these domains, as well as informing the families and members of the disability community in order to access those services.

- Utilize a “train the trainer” model to disseminate materials across Pennsylvania’s 500 school districts, and beyond. Our goal is to empower educators, vocational rehabilitation and administrators to build their own neurodiversity programs, giving them the raw materials needed to work within their systems and with local employers. We are hopeful that this open source approach, in which materials developed are then iterated through practice, will eventually reach a national audience.
- Continue to develop open source training material for the workforce based on best practice. Our ongoing work with various employers will enable us to bridge different cultural contexts and job experiences, allowing us to draw patterns and potentially reinforce and refocus the materials we develop within that community of practice.
- Connect potential candidates to employment opportunities across the country. Ultimately, our goal is to create success in the workplace, so that individuals with autism can make real contributions to the economy and receive their equitable wages as a consequence. By building a network among service providers, and collaborating with a sense of mission, we will be able to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number.

We look forward to working with you in this transformational effort. Thank you for your consideration and contributions to the cause of neurodiversity in the workplace.