

Autism barrier is broken by search for hidden talent

Alexandra Freen

A new IT consultancy has opened its doors in London with the aim of only hiring autistic people, who sometimes have extraordinary cognitive abilities but struggle to secure a job or to fit in with typical workplace demands.

Auticon, which already runs a profitable IT consultancy in Germany with 83 autistic employees serving companies such as Siemens and Allianz, has secured investment from Sir Richard Branson's Virgin Group and the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation for the venture.

Ray Coyle, Auticon's UK chief executive, said that there was a strong business case for hiring autistic people as they often brought a fresh perspective.

"The shortage of job candidates with

'They display great attention to detail with exceptional visual skills'

science, technology, engineering and mathematics qualifications means that more employers are now actively looking outside their traditional pool of recruits to fill vacancies," he said.

More than one in 100 people in the UK are on the autism spectrum, including about 450,000 of working age. Autistic people often find social situations difficult and can struggle to process information quickly, making it hard to secure or keep a job. Only 16 per cent are in work, according to the National Autistic Society.

Auticon provides full-time jobs for autistic people, whom it sends out to work as consultants for its clients, and also gives each employee a job coach to support them in the workplace.

Tom Cowley, an IT consultant from London who was among Auticon's

Viola Sommer says job coaches provide support

first British employees, set his sights on becoming a video game developer when he left university five years ago, but struggled to get a job.

"I do not interview well," Mr Cowley, 29, said. "At some point my peculiarities are going to manifest in some way. Like most people on the spectrum, I'm relatively literal. I get caught up in the linguistic shorthand that people use. If I'm handed a new turn of phrase or idiom I might be inclined to start dissecting it."

Mr Cowley, who relaxes in the evenings by doing maths and playing video games and who had a perfect score in Auticon's cognitive task tests, is now employed testing website functions for a client.

Viola Sommer, head of operations at Auticon, said that the company's job coaches introduced consultants to clients and provided individually tailored support from a distance. "What we don't want is to babysit," she said.

Auticon's work reflects a growing recognition of the importance of securing cognitive diversity in the workplace, along with gender, racial and other forms of diversity, and a handful of big tech employers have special programmes for hiring autistic people.

Stefanie Nennstiel, senior programme manager for diversity at the German software giant SAP, said that the company had hired 120 autistic people at offices around the world since 2013.

SAP's autistic employees were particularly talented at pattern recognition, were highly diligent with a low tolerance for mistakes, displayed great attention to detail and had exceptional visual learning skills, which meant they could often spot errors in documents at first glance, she said. "This is not a corporate social responsibility project.

This gives us access to a huge untapped talent pool. We need more diversity. These employees bring in an additional mindset," Ms Nennstiel added.

