

Finding Hidden Talent

By Barbara Perino and Rebecca Walzak

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One of the most complex facets of a mortgage lending operation is the people within. Prudential Home Mortgage is one good example of having the right people in the right places makes all the difference. During the ten-year period of their existence, the people at all levels of the organization were there because of their unique talents and skill sets. In most cases, it wasn't just about selecting the person with the most experience or based on their track record in other companies, it was the combination of personality, intelligence and character that made the company great.

This is not always easy today. Many of the really good people that spent time in this industry have left. The industry itself has changed significantly in many ways. Restrictions from both a regulatory, secondary and operational perspective demand that members of a company have a wide-ranging knowledge set but be very focused and functional in their area of expertise. Technology, once the special priority of the IT department has become an enterprise wide opportunity and responsibility.

IT departments and technology companies that support the industry have special challenges finding people suited to, and happy with, positions that spend the majority of the time working in front of a computer screen to find problems, or who are willing to focus entirely on developing effective user manuals. These are the individuals that make sure the programs are running correctly; that the reports are accurate and that regulations are

Although individuals with disabilities are not quite as far along in being recognized as good employees, there are companies that have hired handicapped staff and provide them with ramps or special workstations. Yet there are other out there that have the capacity to work hard, handle numerous tasks and assist the companies that hire them to achieve their goals. So where does one find individuals that have a higher education, are eager to learn more, and

those identified as having Asperger's Syndrome (AS). These individuals are high functioning and are at the highest levels within the spectrum of autism. The companies that have placed these individuals in positions that meld their disabilities with the work to be performed, have found that it is not as much a disability but rather an asset in the workplace. They commonly use the disabilities associated with Asperger's Syndrome as a means to excel in their chosen profession. These individuals most often have very strong visual skills such as identifying inconsistencies in data, as well as in music, math and art. These skills take advantage of the individual's ability to eliminate the box that frequently surrounds most employees' ideas or concepts and by doing so they are able to identify unique approaches to problems. As a result, they can be better analytical workers than the average adult because they find errors that a typical mind would not and see things that other similar employees might skip over. They find user material anomalies that we don't catch. In fact, companies that employed these individuals have found their productivity is better than other "normal" employees and their mistakes are rare. It is not uncommon to find that they have a 98% accuracy rate when conducting testing or working on detailed projects.

One of the most beneficial attributes of this disorder is their amazing ability to hyper-focus on an assigned task. This hyper-focus attention span plays out in their ability to pay great attention to detail. As a result, this makes especially well suited as software testers, User Acceptance Testers or debuggers. You will often find that these individuals spend many non-work hours either playing computer games or solving other types of puzzles.

Another attribute of individuals suffering from Asperger's Syndrome is that they can spend hours in front of a computer screen without being bored or frustrated. It is during these long periods of time that the patterns and/or problems that are associated with performance of the technology can be identified. Other employees may not be equipped to see these issues as easily and may miss

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met. They are dogged in their focus and pay attention to the tiniest detail. These folks often work very quietly behind the scenes, not seeking recognition because they enjoy the work they do. They are perfect for testing software programs, working in functions that are detail oriented and spend their time concentrating on the work that needs done, not the office social or political agenda. These are the staff that are content to remain in positions that are extremely detail oriented yet are so critical to the overall functioning of the company. But where do you find people like this?

Another issue that is constantly being managed and overseen by regulators and advocacy groups is the diversity of a company's workforce. The days of personnel being channeled into specific jobs based on race, gender and ethnicity is far behind us and industries are making strides in placing people in positions regardless of this.

like to focus on specific tasks? Well, several employers, including Freddie Mac, have found such people, hired them and are very satisfied with the work they do. Who are these individuals that have disabilities yet are found to be good, even great, employees? These individuals are those affected by autism.

So what is autism and more importantly what is the Autism Spectrum? About 1% of the population in the U.S., or some 3 million people, are thought to have an autism-spectrum disorder. Furthermore this number is growing. Autism is one of the most prevailing disorders in children and the CDC has now claimed that autism actually affects one in 45 boys in general according to the Huffington Post. Estimates range that from 58% to 68% of children have been identified with some type of autism spectrum disorder. Since this issue has a range of severity, those on the higher end, typically are

some of the most minute issues that in the end can be the difference between success and failure of a product.

One area in which AS personnel are superior is in writing manuals to give clients or users very precise instructions on how to work on different software programs. They excel by going step by step without skipping details that others may miss. They also excel when working in the procurement process in such areas as preparing detailed invoices or managing the supply chain.

These employees typically have a very structured nature. They like continuity and consistency. They tend to be extremely loyal employees and are uninterested in office politics or the current office gossip that will distract others and disrupt the train of thought necessary for good product debugging or completion of a detailed task.

Many of these individuals have a higher education and are well qualified for these jobs. In addition, once hired they are very loyal employees and are generally not interested in changing or jumping to a competing company. Once hired it is not uncommon to find that they are working remotely. This situation allows them to avoid the stress of a daily commute or a noisy and social work environment.

However, there are some down sides

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to be considered when hiring individuals with Asperger's Syndrome. While these individuals are at the highest end of the autism spectrum they still have many of the difficulties associated with

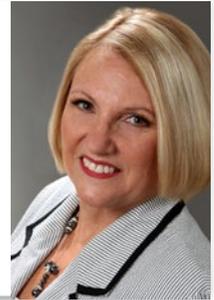


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Barbara Perino is a Certified Professional Co-Active Coach guiding her clients who are executive leaders and their staff. Barbara has been trained through The Coach Training Institute (CTI) located in San Rafael, CA. She completed a Coaching Certification Program through CTI and the International Coaching Federation (ICF). Prior to becoming a coach, Barbara was a 16-year veteran of the residential mortgage industry in a national sales management capacity for property valuation and residential mortgage service providers.

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rjbWalzak Consulting, Inc. was founded and is led by Rebecca Walzak, a leader in operational risk management programs in all areas of the consumer lending industry. In addition to consulting experience in mortgage banking, student lending and other types of consumer lending, she has hands on practical experience in these organizations as well as having held numerous positions from top to bottom of the consumer lending industry over the past 25 years.



the disability. One reason that many of these individuals are not hired is that they never make it past the interview since one of the most persistent difficulties they face is that of social interactions. This along with issues in communicating with others tends to result in interviews that are not successful.

The issues that emerge for people diagnosed with Asperger's are related specifically to social and communication skills. While not apparent in younger children, these skills become

difficult. The most significant of these is difficulty with social communication. This includes things such things as eye contact, conversation and the ability to empathize with another person's perspective.

Once hired the challenge is that they need to be managed differently. Because they have difficulty with social interaction it may require extra effort to initiate work on a specific task as these individuals require more than general directions on how tasks are to be accomplished. It is not uncommon for these individuals to react strongly to negative reactions and comments made by others. They have difficulty just ignoring problems or situations that reflect, in their perspective, negatively on them or that disrupt their work environment. They are sometimes considered "obsessive" or "fanatical" but in actuality they see this as being very interested in one specific topic. All of these tendencies may result in making it harder to coalesce a team that has been charged with a big project.

Despite these difficulties, those companies that have added AS affected people to their workforce are glad they have done so. For companies that have positions that seem to have a revolving employee base due to what has been labeled boring, tedious or just too detailed, this may be the answer you are looking for. ❖

significant as people get older and need to negotiate complex social situations. Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome have a set of characteristics that may make social interaction particularly