Chapter 19

Specialisterne & SAP: A partnership for access to markets, multiple countries/ Denmark

Specialisterne and SAP have established a partnership that aims to harness the special skills of people with autism, and provide them with training and work-integration opportunities. To this end, they have implemented the "Autism at Work Programme". This chapter describes the partnership's objectives, rationale and key activities, together with the challenges faced in implementing it and the impact it has achieved to date. It concludes with the lessons learnt and the conditions for transferring this practice to another context.

Summary

While people with *autism spectrum disorder (ASD)* have unique skills – for example, an outstanding memory or a remarkable eye for detail, a structured way of working, the ability to think outside the box and perform repetitive tasks with ceaseless enthusiasm – they struggle with social interaction and personal communication.

Specialisterne ("The Specialists") is a social enterprise established in Denmark in 2004 to pioneer new ways of harnessing the untapped skills of people with ASD and empower them by matching them with businesses in need of information technology (IT) experts. An impact assessment of Specialisterne concluded that its consultants have become valuable contributors to the labour market and solid taxpayers, less reliant on social-welfare contributions. In 2008, Specialisterne Foundation (SPF) was established to scale the Specialisterne model and impact, with the objective of creating one million jobs globally for people with ASD by 2025. To this end, it has developed partnerships with international

IT firms, marking a big step forward in creating decent workplaces for people with ASD, and setting standards for their recruitment and onboarding.

As Specialisterne[1] understands how best to recruit, train and retain new employees with autism, SPF and SAP[2] partnered to create the "Autism at Work Programme". This joint experience has clearly demonstrated that partnerships between public sector organisations, innovative companies and social enterprises can boost quality job creation for people with ASD. Indeed, the involvement of public sector institutions at all levels (local, regional, national and European) brings crucial advantages: these institutions can provide funding to conduct feasibility studies and develop (local/regional) strategies, use social clauses in public procurement procedures to benefit employers of people with autism or similar disadvantages, assist in identifying and training talented young people with autism, and support awareness-raising awareness efforts.

Key facts

Specialisterne was established in Denmark in 2004 to pioneer new ways of harnessing the untapped skills of individuals with ASD. Specialisterne´s core business is assessing, training, employing and matching people with ASD with Danish companies in need of IT experts or consultants to perform crucial business services (e.g. testing of critical IT systems, software programming, coding, quality control, data analysis and conversion, filing systems and metadata management, information packaging and/or logistics). Specialisterne Denmark employs approximately 50 IT experts, 75 % of whom have been diagnosed with ASD.[3]

In 2008, **SPF** was established to scale the Specialisterne model and impact by serving as a global dissemination, competence and knowledge centre on the work integration of people with ASD. The Foundation owns 100% of Specialisterne Denmark, as well as the Specialisterne concept and trademark. It has supported to expansion of the Specialisterne model as a franchise concept to Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States. Specialisterne also has collaborations – but no local offices – in Argentina, the Czech Republic and India. Over the last 10 years, SPF and its partners have trained and employed more than 1 000 individuals with ASD (Thomsen and Sistach, 2016). Its recent partnerships with large IT corporations add a new dimension to SPF's replication strategy and have great potential for creating a decent workplace for people with ASD.

Specialisterne signed its first corporate partnership agreement with SAP, the world's third-largest independent software company. SAP develops and distributes enterprise software for managing business operations and customer relations; it is the global leader in business applications and analytic software, and the enterprise cloud company with the greatest number of users. Its strong innovation capacity has proved vital to its development in an extremely competitive and fast-moving environment. With employees from over 150 nationalities, SAP is committed to diversity and inclusion in the workplace, spurred by the belief that a diverse workforce fosters a more creative and innovative company.

Objectives

SPF aims to scale Specialisterne's approach, creating one million jobs globally for people with ASD and similar challenges by 2025. SAP aims to help to improve people's lives while connecting them with seamlessly with technology in real-time,[4] and has started a transformation process of its key features of its human-resource development operations

to hire and benefit from people who think and behave differently.[5] SAP implemented in partnership with SPF the "Autism at Work Programme", spurred by two ambitious objectives:

– achieve sustainable recruitment and on-boarding procedures and operations, which contribute to the implementation of the SAP's mission of thought leadership on global innovation through establishing a learning programme for all stakeholders involved

– re-design and re-orient the SAP human resource policies and processes to fully incorporate neurodiversity (so that the programme's parallel on-boarding process would no longer be necessary to access the talents of people with ASD).

Rationale

Specialisterne is the first enterprise in the world to have recognised and taken advantage of the specific skills of people with ASD in performing work functions requiring a high degree of detail, strong logical and analytical thinking, meticulous inspection and zero-error tolerance. Specialisterne's founder, Thorkil Sonne, has a personal stake in changing the professional paradigm for people with ASD: his own son has been diagnosed with autism.

Over 1% of the population (Autism Europe, 2014; Chen et al., 2015) has been identified with ASD[6] and faces challenges with social interaction, communication skills and expected behaviour in corporate environments. Lack of understanding and appreciation makes it hard for autistic people to realise their career potential. Across the European Union, the overall unemployment rate was 8.6 % in May 2016;[7] less than one person out of two with a disability is employed or active (Eurostat, 2014).[8] The unemployment rate is much higher for people with ASD (Chen et al., 2015); studies indicate an unemployment rate between 76% and 90% (Autism Europe, 2014). Even people with ASD who possess secondary or post-secondary certificates and degrees are "still being employed in unskilled low-level jobs, working much few hours per week, being poorly paid and unable to sustain a job for an extended period of time" (Chen et al., 2015). Yet most people with ASD who receive unemployment benefits would like to work; this coincides with a growing interest in their skills on the part of businesses (notably in the IT sector).

Despite this interest, hiring people with ASD goes against many social norms and traditional practices (e.g. in terms of recruitment, training and development, and workplace design): companies look for employees who are good team players, communicate and promote themselves effectively, and can manage stress. Hence, the most challenging task is changing the way companies think of employees with ASD, whom they sometimes consider as being rigid and moody, or possessing poor communication skills. To activate their hidden talents and benefit from the value they create, people thinking or behaving differently need to be placed in environments that maximise their ability to contribute.

Activities

The "Autism at Work Programme"

To support its global vision and strategy, in 2013 SAP committed to raising to 1% the share of people with ASD in its global workforce, proportional with their share in overall society. In close collaboration with SPF, it designed and implemented the "Autism at Work Programme", which has become part of its wider diversity and inclusion programme. The Programme recognises that autistic people may outperform most "neuro-typical" IT experts and produce the most innovative ideas, providing they are given an environment and context allowing them to make optimal use of their strengths. As a key activity of its global

"people sustainability" department, the Programme has received top-level support and is overseen directly by the chief human resources officer, who is a member of the SAP global managing board.

To implement the Programme, SAP works globally with SPF, and locally with Specialisterne offices and respective partners. At the core of this partnership are specific steps undertaken to change SAP's recruitment, training and on-boarding processes.

1. SPF and SAP identify potential suitable locations for piloting the programme, where they liaise with public and non-profit organisations[9] with the capacity to train, place or support people with ASD or physical disabilities in productive employment. Some local support organisations have taken a leading role in running the assessments and trainings.

2. Together with local partners, local SAP programme managers identify potential positions to be filled[10] within SAP. They then conduct phone interviews, develop a pool of candidates, and run background and reference checks. Once this pre-screening process is finalised, the selected candidates undergo a week of training in "soft skills" to acquaint themselves with the social norms of a professional workplace. Most candidates move on to a pre-employment training (lasting four to six weeks) to learn about SAP methodologies, develop relevant skills, work on projects designed to assess key competences in specific areas of expertise (e.g. programming) and help managers know the candidates in informal settings. The training can be delivered by the local partners, who receive intensive guidance by SPF and/or SAP staff, and tailor it to the local SAP needs, practice and culture. In parallel, SAP provides extensive awareness and autism-sensitivity training to the teams that will welcome the selected candidates.

3. Local SAP programme managers gather the information about candidates' capabilities and match them with jobs, potentially resulting in an immediate employment offer by SAP, a temporary job offer by local partners or future job opportunities. The managers organise two coaching and mentoring circles (provided by SAP colleagues and volunteers, or partner organisations) for new colleagues to help them maximise their chances of success, both in the workplace and in their personal life.

Challenges encountered and impact

Challenges

To assess the potential of SPF to achieve its ambitious vision, and understand the complexity and nature of the challenges ahead, table 19.1. shows a strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis (based on Welcher-Ulholm, 2014; Thomsen and Sistach, 2016) of its replication and corporate partnership approaches.

The SWOT analysis highlights the challenges facing any partnership aiming to provide decent jobs for people with ASD, relating to:

● changing the mindsets (awareness, knowledge and perception) of decision-makers in companies, social organisations caring for people with handicaps and the public sector, so that they invest in innovative recruiting and onboarding practices, taking into account diversity and the specific capabilities of people with ASD

● aligning stakeholder organisations to engage and collaborate in long-term partnerships aiming to provide targeted training, communications and mentoring services on the recruitment and onboarding process

- accessing public subsidies to fund the costs of tailor-made training courses
- instituting legal/administrative recognition as a pathway to supporting people with ASD, their professional development and their employers
- gaining access to social impact investors who provide grants or patient capital to launch new operations.

Table 19.1. **SWOT analysis of Specialisterne & SAP Partnership**

Strengths	Weaknesses
- The first collaboration of its kind - Strong social brand - Knowledge centre and core competency in training, recruitment and creating job opportunities for people with ASD - Evidence of shared-value creation for governments, enterprises and disadvantaged people - Proven model for generating alignment and commitment of local stakeholders to partner in delivering new methods of work inclusion (social innovation) - Proven model for implementing a paradigm shift in selection and recruitment, work design and training, based on diversity management	- Widespread lack of understanding and appreciation of the special skills of people with ASD - Lack of recognition/certification of high-functioning autism as a disability eligible for public support - Creation of jobs for people with ASD takes time; numbers are still relatively low compared to the global goal - Need to adapt global scaling approaches to new locations' specificities - Costly and time-consuming case-by-case preparation (feasibility study to assess market potential, business plan, co-operation agreements with stakeholders, etc.) and arrangements to subsidise training - Need evidence of sustainable operations for a clear business case and a critical mass of recruitments
Opportunities	**Threats**
- Growing demand for IT specialists in a digital economy - Government incentives (in some countries) for recruiting people with a handicap - Reduced public welfare and social support services, including for people with a handicap, increase the pressure to secure a living for people with ASD	- Integration of people with ASD may not be a priority in countries with high unemployment and a lack of vacancies - In countries with a less developed welfare system, less impact owing to lower social benefits and stronger role of family in caring for autistic family members

Impact

Based on the social return on investment measured by its first impact investor (Den Sociale Kapitalfond, 2012), Specialisterne Denmark made a first impact assessment of its business model for its initial years of operation (Specialist People Foundation, 2013). The assessment concluded that for the 35 people on average with ASD employed by, or through, Specialisterne Denmark between 2008 and 2012, Specialisterne:

- demonstrated this approach's cost efficiency, because every krone invested in supporting the employment of individuals with ASD, Specialisterne garnered twice as much return in taxes and pension contributions than if the same resources had been invested in the same individuals without jobs, e.g. under the guise of unemployment benefits and other welfare payments[11]
- increased the quality of life for Specialisterne's consultants with ASD, all of whom stated that their job had had a positive impact on their lives, especially in terms of their social and economic independence, and general wellbeing.

The "Autism at Work Programme" was initiated in 2013, and is now fine-tuning processes and scaling regional partnerships to become sustainable. By mid-2016, the Programme operated in 12 SAP offices and labs in 8 countries (Germany, India, Canada, Brazil, the Czech Republic, Ireland, the United States and Australia) and provided work opportunities to more than 100 people. Further launches in South Korea, France, Argentina, China and Switzerland are planned.

Lessons learnt and conditions for potential replicability

Lessons learnt

The experience of SPF and SAP has clearly demonstrated the gap between the potential impact of mobilising the special skills of people with ASD and the actual scale of their employment opportunities: traditional corporate approaches to work design, recruitment and selection, and training and development do not consider the need for neurodiversity, i.e. the inclusion in work teams of people who perceive and think differently, and are therefore drivers of creativity and innovation. It has also highlighted that neither public-sector organisations, innovative companies, nor social enterprises can bridge this gap alone: partnerships with experienced support organisations, higher education institutes, companies, and public agencies and services engaged in work-inclusion activities are key drivers of future success. Paradigm shifts in administrative procedures and business routines take time. Early innovators in the public sector require evidence of strong political will and public benefits, while innovators in the business sector require funding of learning costs and evidence of the business case. As framework conditions and socio-economic conditions differ for each country, no universally applicable model for scaling the Specialisterne approach exists.

The success of the SPF-SAP partnership rests on the convergence of objectives, the pooling of resources, and both sides' strong commitment to developing and using the special skills and competences of people who "think outside the box". Each organisation has brought to the table its specific resources, capacities, networks and management practices, as well as its commitment to developing a strategy to include people with ASD in the labour market, and implementing a set of actions to this end. This experience shows that liaising and collaborating with public and non-profit organisations with the potential to educate or train, place or support people with disabilities in productive employment:

- helped map and navigate the complex landscape of public programmes, policies and regulations specific to each location
- generated a starting pool of candidates with rich qualifications (as the organisations were already in touch with many motivated and hardworking people with ASD seeking employment) or talented students with ASD in high schools, colleges and universities
- was often also instrumental in mobilising funding (e.g. public grants or subsidies, donations from philanthropy) to pay for candidate training.

Conditions for potential replicability

The involvement of public sector institutions at the local, regional, national and European levels has been a crucial element for replication and scaling. It can take different forms or roles, such as:

- acting as a convenor bringing together all stakeholders, who commit to teaming up around a common work-inclusion strategy
- providing grants for conducting feasibility studies and developing local and regional strategies, in close partnership with relevant stakeholders
- providing grants for pilot actions to test the suitability, feasibility and acceptance of new ways of providing quality jobs for people with ASD
- commissioning ex-ante and ex-post assessments of work-integration schemes for people with ASD, to provide evidence of the societal value generated

● raising awareness in society, business and the public sector (through media, workshops, courses or public events) to foster respect and recognition of the skills and rights of people with autism

● identifying talented young people who can enter public education institutes (schools, vocational training institutes, universities)

● delivering training and assessment services through community agencies to candidates with ASD.

Public sector institutions can also help create quality jobs for people with ASD, and benefit employers of people with ASD or similar disadvantages, by using social clauses in public procurement procedures that:

● restrict tendering procedures to economic operators whose main aim is the social and professional integration of persons with disabilities and disadvantaged persons ("reserved contracts")

● apply best price-quality ratio as an award criterion, including "social considerations" (such as promoting employment opportunities, ensuring decent work, supporting social inclusion or promoting social economy organisations) directly related to the contract's subject matter.

All these forms and instruments of public support can be replicated or adapted to related initiatives in other regional contexts, providing the initiative:

● is promoted by a champion with a high reputation in society and the economy

● can tap into the resources, capacities and competences of existing networks of organisations engaged in work integration

● teams up with corporate partners that are prepared to make a paradigm shift in their human-resource development concepts and practices

● has a plan to ensure the sustainability of its activities, through long-term funding arrangements and mainstreaming into corporate onboarding processes.

Notes

1. In this text, Specialisterne refers to the Specialisterne Foundation (SPF) and the partners that are licensed to use the Specialisterne brand and work together to deliver services for corporations.

2. SAP is headquartered in Germany, and has regional offices in 180 countries. Globally, SAP employs over 77 000 people of 150 nationalities; it has over 13 000 partners and over 290 000 customers in 190 countries. The acronym SAP stands for Systems, Applications, and Products in data processing. The SAP acronym was derived from the original German name, which was Systemanalyse und Programmentwicklung.

3. In the course of preparing this case study, interviews were conducted with Henrik Thomsen, Chief Operating Officer, Specialisterne Foundation; Charlotte Holmer Kaufmanas, Head of Business Development, Specialisterne Denmark; Stefanie Nennstiel, Senior Director Diversity & Inclusion, SAP; and Gabriele Hartmann, Head of Corporate Social Responsibility Middle and Eastern Europe, SAP.

4. *http://go.sap.com/corporate/en/vision-purpose.html.*

5. SAP sees the recruitment of people with ASD not as a means to achieve legally enforced diversity quota or as an altruistic act of charity or as Corporate Social Responsibility, but as a logical step in following a new resources paradigm that aims at mobilising all innovation-driving resources by ensuring a great diversity of its IT-workforce.

6. Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and autism are both general terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development. These disorders are characterised, in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication, and possible repetitive behaviours. For more information, see: *http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/facts.html.*

7. *http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Unemployment_statistics*.

8. Defined as persons with basic activity difficulties: *http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Disability_statistics_-_labour_market_access*.

9. The local partners are: EnableIndia (India); Nautis (Czech Republic); Pandorga (Brazil); The Arc, DOR and Expandability (United States); and KVJS/Integrationsfachdienst (Germany).

10. e.g. software developer and tester; information developer; business analyst; IT tech support; IT project management; technical customer support; graphic designers; media/communications analyst; data analyst; product manager; consultant; marketing support expert; and financial or HR administrator.

11. More specifically, Specialisterne:

- created a total value of EUR 6.6 million (DKK 49.42 million) through hiring or securing jobs for people with autism, leading to savings by the Danish welfare system and income derived from extra taxes and pension contributions
- generated a net value of EUR 1.8 million (DKK 13.5 million) for the Danish government (after deduction of public investments made to support individuals with ASD in their jobs).

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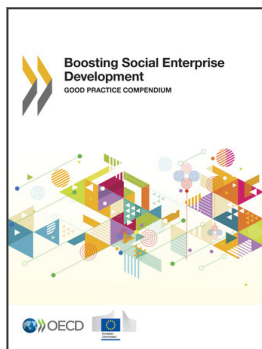
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