

16. auticon: promoting a neurodiverse workforce

Dorottya Sallai and Ian Hill

In today's diverse workplace, understanding and embracing neurodiversity is becoming increasingly important. This case study explores auticon's innovative strategy of not only successfully integrating autistic people into the workforce but also excelling and growing because of its neurodiverse workforce. The case addresses important questions about diversity and inclusiveness, its complexity, the challenges of recruitment and retention as well as the role of leadership in creating and sustaining an inclusive culture. The case provides a rich source of material for exploring a wide range of management issues and teaching goals such as:

Diversity and inclusion

- Understanding the challenges faced by neurodivergent employees and strategies for creating an inclusive work environment.

Organisational behaviour

- How organisations can effectively balance the needs of the market with the needs of their employees.
- Cultural change: promoting a culture of inclusion and respect, and the role of leadership in driving this change.

Human resource management

- Recruitment and retention: challenges and best practices in recruiting and retaining neurodivergent talent and tailoring recruitment processes to be more inclusive.
- Employee support and wellbeing: support mechanisms.

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Guidance on how to write a case analysis can be found in Chapter 1, 'Business cases: what are they, why do we use them and how should you go about doing a case analysis?'

Introduction

In recent years, there has been a growing recognition of neurodiversity in the workplace, particularly focusing on conditions like autism. This case study explores auticon, a fast-growing global company that differentiates itself by exclusively employing autistic adults as IT consultants.¹ We investigate the innovative elements of their business strategy that have enabled them to build a successful and profitable global consultancy through this unique staffing model. Their approach not only transforms lives and social perceptions but also drives organisational growth in an increasingly competitive market.

Neurodivergent individuals often bring unique strengths to business, such as creativity and the ability to handle varied tasks. Companies like Rolls-Royce, AstraZeneca, JPMorgan, Microsoft and the National Trust are leading the way by adopting inclusive recruitment strategies and providing support for neurodivergent employees.² Despite these advancements, significant barriers to employment and fears of discrimination persist for neurodivergent individuals. In the United Kingdom only 30 per cent of autistic adults are employed compared to 50 per cent of all disabled individuals and 80 per cent of non-disabled people.³ Advocacy groups emphasise that the impact of successful inclusion extends far beyond productivity metrics. Doubling the employment rate for autistic people could boost the economy by up to £1.5 billion each year just in the UK alone.⁴

auticon is a business-to-business company and global social enterprise that delivers social innovation through three types of services: IT consulting, neuroinclusion consulting and entrepreneurial initiatives. As a social enterprise, their core mission is to address the inequalities in employment for neurodivergent adults and showcase the strength of neurodiversity in business and society. The company brands itself as a talent resource providing services to small organisations as well as blue-chip multinationals such as NatWest, Virgin, KPMG, Disney, IBM, Jonson and Johnson, Deloitte, Zurich Insurance and Deloitte among many others.

In 2024, the company operated in 15 countries across three continents, including the United Kingdom, Ireland, United States, Germany, France, Switzerland, Canada, Australia and Italy. In 2023, the global organisation had an approximate turnover of 40 million euros and employed 571 individuals, out of which 436 (more than 75 per cent) were autistic consultants.⁵ The firm's operations team, which comprises 19 per cent of the total workforce, is also

neurodiverse, hiring both neurodivergent and non-neurodivergent people. However, in these roles, only 24 per cent of the employees disclosed that they have a neurodivergent condition (autism, ADHD, dyslexia or the combination of these)⁶ resulting in more than 80 per cent of auticon's total workforce being neurodivergent.

Despite their success and fast global growth, auticon faces several significant challenges. One of the primary issues is aligning labour supply with demand, particularly when integrating neurodivergent individuals into their workforce. This raises broader questions about how companies can effectively balance the needs of the market with the needs of their employees. Additionally, demonstrating the business benefits of inclusive hiring practices to large organisations is crucial. What strategies can be employed to showcase the value of neurodivergent talent?

Scaling their impact in the labour market is another challenge, prompting inquiries into how businesses can ensure meaningful employment opportunities for neurodivergent individuals while expanding their reach. Potential barriers include the challenge of creating a truly sustainable and inclusive working environment that addresses the long-term needs of neurodivergent employees instead of one-off measures to ensure their retention and career progression. Furthermore, how can organisations measure and communicate the value added of neurodiverse workforce to stakeholders who may be unfamiliar with such initiatives or the term itself? In the next sections we will explore these questions in more detail, highlighting the complexities and opportunities in fostering a truly inclusive workplace.

What is autism and how is related to neurodiversity?

Autism/autistic spectrum condition (ASC)/autistic spectrum disorder (ASD) is a neurotype or lifelong developmental condition that individuals have from birth.⁷ It is characterised by communication and social interaction challenges, sensory issues and repetitive behaviours,⁸ and affects how people interact with the world.⁹ Many members of the community prefer identification-first language and being called 'autistic' rather than 'someone with autism' because their autistic neurotype is inherent to them.¹⁰ However, this is a matter of personal preference and identity. According to the UK National Health Service (NHS) autism affects how the brain functions, influencing how individuals perceive the world and interact with others.¹¹ Often, people feel being autistic is a fundamental aspect of their identity.¹²

Being autistic does not mean you have an illness or disease. It means your brain works in a different way from other people.¹³

Autism is part of the broader term ‘neurodiversity’ that refers to the natural variation in the functioning of the human brain, and hence the behavioural traits that distinguish individuals.^{14,15} People who use similar information-processing methods and thought patterns – such as those with autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD¹⁶ or other neurological variations – may share a sense of identity and consider themselves as being neurodivergent. Between 15 per cent and 20 per cent of the global population is estimated to be neurodivergent,¹⁷ giving an estimated 1 per cent of working age adults. This means that from the approximately 41 million working age adults in the UK, at least around 330,000 are autistic.¹⁸

Neurodivergent people can be identified by medical diagnoses, while non-neurodivergent people are sometimes referred to as ‘neurotypical’, despite the multidimensionality of ‘neurotypicality’. Neurodiversity at work is often and increasingly becoming part of the organisational ‘equality, diversity and inclusion’ (EDI) efforts that emphasise the value of different types of information processing, learning and communication styles¹⁹ in the workforce.

Neurodiversity, employment and career progression

The concept of neurodiversity highlights that the under-representation of neurodivergent individuals in the workforce, who have historically faced unemployment and underemployment rates of up to 85–90 per cent,²⁰ is primarily caused by recruitment processes that have a narrow definition of talent and biased job interviews that disadvantage individuals with unconventional communication styles. Neurodivergent individuals have skills and talents that make their contribution to organisations unique and valuable. Despite this new approach to a more inclusive view of neurological diversity, most recent statistics paint a stark picture of their employment. In 2022–2023 just 30 per cent of autistic people in UK were employed despite 77 per cent of unemployed autistic working-age adults wanting to work.

Autistic people experience the most significant wage gap compared to other disability groups. Autistic graduates are twice as likely to become unemployed after 15 months compared to non-disabled graduates, more likely to be over-qualified for their current job and are more likely to have zero-hour contracts, while being less likely to have a permanent position. By creating inclusive work environments, organisations may leverage neurodiversity as a competitive advantage and by adapting recruitment and support strategies, companies benefit from diverse skills and perspectives. Inclusivity enhances employee retention and boosts morale, leading to higher engagement. An inclusive culture attracts a wider range of talent, making the company more appealing.²¹

auticon: How a problem was turned into an opportunity

auticon’s journey began in Berlin in 2011, when a father, Dirk Müller-Remus, decided to do something about the discrimination of people with autism

in the labour market and create an environment that would provide better employment opportunities for his autistic son. auticon has since expanded to become the largest autistic-majority company globally. In 2016, Sir Richard Branson invested in the company, which then expanded into Italy and Switzerland before acquiring two North American autism employer startups, Mind Spark and Meticulon, in 2018. Continuing its global growth in 2019, auticon opened an office in Australia, but achieved its historic milestone when it signed a merger agreement with Norwegian IT consulting firm Unicus.

The company offers three types of services: IT consulting, neuroinclusion services and innovative bespoke solutions to problems through so-called auticon Labs. In the area of IT consulting they offer technology consulting and resourcing, focusing mostly on data services, software development and quality assurance testing. In their neuroinclusion services they offer other organisations neuroinclusion coaching, advisory services, neurodiversity training and neurodiversity e-learning to support the creation of inclusive workplaces that work for neurodivergent individuals as well as everyone else. auticon also drives innovation through its entrepreneurial initiatives at auticon Labs, where the company designs and develops commercial technology solutions aimed at overcoming social and environmental challenges faced by neurodivergent professionals and create more neuroinclusive workplaces.

In their 2023 Impact Report, auticon highlighted that the talent shortages in the tech sector are increasingly difficult to fill. They argue that by 2030, the demand for skilled workers will outstrip supply, resulting in a global talent shortage of 85.2 million people. In contrast despite being talented, qualified and keen to work, only 30 per cent of autistic people are in full-time employment.²²

I call it the perfect storm for good. auticon sits at the confluence of surging awareness and support for neurodiversity in the workplace, acute shortages of tech talent and the tragically overlooked community of very specially abled neurodivergent people. (Eric Olafson, Investor and auticon Executive Board member)²³

auticon set out to tap into this talent pool by employing autistic adults as technology consultants and supporting them with neuroinclusion coaches and project managers. What started as a father's ambition to ensure his son's future has developed into a global firm that champions the talents of neurodivergent individuals and sets new standards for workplace social impact.

Positioning neurodiversity as a competitive advantage

Instead of focusing on the challenges that autistic individuals face, auticon promotes its workforce and services emphasising the strengths and special skills of autistic professionals as unique selling points. Neurodivergence is

associated with some common strengths and skills that can effectively contribute to organisational growth, such as attention to detail, sustained focus, pattern recognition, innovative problem-solving, creative or unconventional thinking, mathematical or technical abilities, interests or expertise in 'niche' areas, as well as loyalty, honesty and reliability.²⁴ It is not a surprise that their consultants excel in roles such as software development, data analysis and quality assurance engineering.

Indeed research shows that having employees with disabilities in its workforce can build a firm's competitive advantage in four ways:

1. Those with disabilities often possess special talents that make them better at certain jobs.
2. Their presence elevates the organisational culture, fostering collaboration and increasing productivity.
3. A company's reputation for inclusivity improves its value proposition with customers, who are more inclined to form long-term relationships with the company.
4. Being acknowledged as socially responsible gives a firm an advantage in the competition for talent and capital.²⁵

By reframing autism, auticon approaches neurodiversity as a source for their competitive advantage, for instance by emphasising the value of some autistic traits that are considered essential in providing innovative technology services, such as finding creative solutions, a narrow focus on complex data patterns or excelling in repetitious tasks. auticon's vision is to 'build a more inclusive world', while their mission is to 'address the inequalities in employment for neurodivergent adults and showcase the strengths of neurodiversity in society'. By approaching autism as an opportunity to embrace the diversity in skills, thinking and capabilities they promote a mindset shift and a new framing for the perception of neurodiversity in the labour market, driving social change.

Their motto '*Autism is not a processing error, it's a different operating system*' is not only empowering for those who live with autism, but also reflects a significantly different approach to differences in talent in contrast to most large employers.

Businesses like auticon are true trailblazers because they challenge and encourage us to view conditions like autism and dyslexia differently, not as disabilities, but as talents and assets. My dyslexia has given me a massive advantage in life. It has helped me to think creatively and laterally, and to simplify things, which has been a huge asset when building our Virgin businesses. (Sir Richard Branson)²⁶

Approaches like auticon's that promote more neuroinclusion in the workplace can contribute to filling vacancies and growth in the economy by unlocking the potential of a large untapped talent pool.²⁷

Working with Unicus, I feel that autism has been de-dramatised for me. It is easy to work with autistic colleagues. (Lars Olof Berg, Produktchef, PictureMyLife)²⁸

In 2023, auticon and Unicus completed 402 technology consulting projects for 266 clients and helped many neurodivergent adults not just attain employment but also grow into technical leadership and managerial roles. According to Aleksander Oleszkiewicz, the director of auticon Labs, organisations benefit from neurodivergent leaders in the following ways:

I see them as very fact-driven, evaluating people purely on their performance and not taking into consideration any factors that are commonly connected with discrimination. They are fair to their team members, may sometimes be a bit harsh but they are honest, straightforward and don't play games. They follow clear and written rules and are open to the individual needs of each person – which creates a great foundation for healthy and high-performing teams.²⁹

The economic benefits of neuroinclusion

Fostering a neurodiverse and inclusive workplace culture significantly enhances employee retention, engagement and talent attraction. Neurodivergent individuals tend to have lower turnover rates than their neurotypical counterparts, with companies like Microsoft, SAP, JPMorgan Chase, and EY reporting retention rates exceeding 90 per cent.³⁰ Initiatives aimed at neurodiversity, such as Microsoft's Neurodiversity Hiring Programme,³¹ have shown that neurotypical employees in these environments find their work more meaningful and experience increased morale.

Companies that embrace diversity often see improved financial outcomes, with research indicating that organisations prioritising disability inclusion achieve above-average profitability and shareholder returns. Teams that include neurodivergent professionals can be up to 30 per cent more productive, as studies reveal that autistic employees excel at processing information quickly and identifying critical details. For instance, JPMorgan Chase's Autism at Work programme reported that participants were 90 per cent to 140 per cent more productive than their neurotypical peers.³²

The development of the business model and challenges of growth

The company operates in the form of a global social enterprise. This means that they are not a charity and are not supported by any governmental or other type of funding. auticon is a for-profit organisation that operates as a social enterprise, investing all their profits into the social mission to address the inequalities in employment for neurodivergent adults and showcase the strength of neurodiversity in society and business. The company advocates that the strategy for neuroinclusion must be closely aligned with the broader inclusion strategy. If the approach is effective for autistic individuals, it will ultimately benefit everyone within the organisation. This perspective highlights the importance of viewing autism through the lens of the company's operational model. With over 450 employees on the autism spectrum, the organisation stands as one of the largest employers of disclosed autistic talent globally.

Each year, the company publishes an impact report that includes metrics on the long-term sustainable employment of its autistic colleagues, alongside client feedback. The report demonstrates the effectiveness of their model, revealing that 81 per cent of autistic staff in the UK feel their wellbeing has improved since joining the company, while 95 per cent feel supported in their roles. Furthermore, 84 per cent of their clients have noted a shift in their perception of autism since collaborating with the organisation, and 92 per cent express increased confidence in working alongside autistic individuals. These statistics encapsulate the essence of the organisation's commitment to inclusion.

When the company started, they were initially delivering quality assurance services out of their offices only. However, as the organisation entered new markets, they realised that this type of consultancy model was not transformational enough for their clients and the wider society as autistic consultants were not seen by the clients when delivering projects. They decided to evolve the model and adopt a more traditional, IT consulting approach employing autistic adults on a permanent basis and sending them to clients as any other consultancy firm would, giving their clients a chance to work alongside them.

There are notable differences in operational approaches across various markets. In the UK, there is a stronger focus on data science, whereas in countries such as the Netherlands and Germany, there is a stronger focus on quality assurance services that are in higher demand in these more regulated markets. While in Germany, the organisation continues to deliver fixed-cost projects, where consultants are not working on the client's site, in the UK all consultants work within client teams rather than in the auticon office. Delivering a fixed-cost project is also part of their social mission, since it helps the company to employ people, who might struggle with the workplace environment and the work in the traditional sense on a client's site.

One of the biggest challenges for business growth is the issue of supply and demand. The supply of highly qualified candidates does not always coincide with suitable projects for them or vice versa. The firm may have high demand for their services but struggle to find individuals with the necessary skills and experience. Aligning the supply of highly skilled autistic talent with the growing demand from clients is critical as it impacts auticon's mission to showcase the strengths of neurodiversity while maintaining business growth and client satisfaction. During the pandemic, the company experienced a slow-down, especially in the UK market. As many IT jobs became offshored, and with English language being widely spoken, competition for providing skilled talent intensified, particularly from countries like Romania, Egypt, India and Poland.

Although there is increasing interest in working with neurodivergent individuals, clients may often prefer experienced candidates over those who are inexperienced and require significant support. This is challenging because those who need auticon's help the most are often inexperienced graduates and may still be unfamiliar with the workplace. Hence, balancing the needs of the market with developing a pipeline of well-prepared talent is a priority for auticon.

The core service that we offer is what we call the lived experience with autistic talent. In our experience there is nothing more efficient than working alongside highly skilled autistic individuals within a support framework that mitigates risk and overheads. This is the most effective way to shift misconception about autism that to this day represents the biggest stumbling block to the employment of autistic people. It's transformative. (Andrea Girlanda, CEO, auticon UK)³³

Scaling impact on the labour market

The second challenge auticon is facing is scaling their impact in the labour market. This has prompted them to change their business model and offer complementary services, besides IT consultancy. Organisations increasingly seek to support their own neurodivergent staff internally rather than hiring external consultants. However, committing to the necessary business transformation to become truly inclusive is difficult for many. Creating an inclusive culture is a complex transformation journey without a single solution. While some organisations have autism-at-work programmes, these often create artificial environments. Once individuals leave these supportive bubbles, they may face unfriendly or even toxic and aggressive workplaces.

Organisations may also pursue neuroinclusion initiatives for superficial reasons, aiming to increase the number of autistic employees merely to report an increase at the end of the year in their ESG reports, but not systematically investing in their cultural transformation, failing to follow up how many of

these individuals they retain, or whether their hiring and retention strategies are suitable and sustainable.

Processes are usually designed by and for neurotypical people, beginning with the hiring stage. According to a study in the tech sector more than half (56 per cent) of neurotypical individuals admitted to having limited or no knowledge about neurodiversity,³⁴ its conditions and symptoms, while a survey by The Institute of Leadership & Management showed that half of UK leaders and managers would be uncomfortable employing or line managing someone who has one or more neurodivergent conditions.³⁵

True inclusion requires a holistic approach and continuous investment, as neuroinclusion is not binary but has multiple shades. There's no finish line. The biggest challenge for me is to show large organisations that there is business merit in what we do, and this is why I say, look at us. We are the living proof that this can work. (Andrea Girlanda, CEO, auticon UK)³⁶

The support framework for effective neuroinclusion

auticon employs technical directors and job coaches who represent the skills and experience of their consultants to clients while also supporting successful project delivery.

Technical directors

Technical directors provide both objective assessments of behavioural strengths and weaknesses and technical guidance during assignments. Technical support differs from psychological support; it is provided by technical experts who match client requirements with the skills of the consultants. If there is no suitable match, the organisation is transparent, stating that they do not have anyone available. They prioritise honesty over misrepresentation, as this approach fosters win-win situations for all parties involved.

It is well-known that autistic individuals often face challenges during interviews. To address this, when a suitable job opportunity arises for their consultants, the technical directors engage directly with the client team to clarify the requirements and align them with the skills and abilities of the consultants – effectively conducting interviews on their behalf. Many consultants tend to be modest about their capabilities and may take time to formulate their responses. This can sometimes cause concern among client teams, who may have preconceived notions about autism. However, the thoughtful consideration that these consultants give to their answers is not a negative trait. For instance, when asked about their proficiency in Java programming, a consultant might respond modestly, saying, 'I know a little' while, in reality, they have outstanding expertise in the programming language.

If you have several children, you know that they're different. You want the same for all of them, but you treat them differently because they have different traits, and this applies to all of us. We all have different areas of strength and weakness, so the key here is flexibility as opposed to conformity. And this is why so many autistic people fail in the traditional recruitment process, because just they don't have the interview skills that many non-neurodivergent people have. It's a process that tends to reward people who like to self-promote, who have sales and presentation skills. But you don't need those skills to be an excellent cybersecurity expert, or a fantastic data scientist. (Andrea Girlanda, CEO auticon UK)³⁷

Reasonable adjustments and job coaches

The company advocates that all autistic people should be entitled to reasonable adjustments irrespective whether they view autism as a disability or not. They recognise the challenges that autistic employees face in typical workplaces, such as the sensory environment, vague or ambiguous communication, small talk, and 'connecting' with colleagues.

What we pursue at auticon is equality of opportunities, not equality of treatment. It's very, very different. (Andrea Girlanda, CEO auticon UK)³⁸

According to research, up to 90 per cent of autistic people experience sensory processing sensitivities, which can make ordinary sensations overwhelming or painful.³⁹ While most people can ignore footsteps, ringing phones and co-workers talking, autistic people may find these noises extreme, causing them stress, anxiety or even physical discomfort.

It's been a challenge finding a job that wouldn't exacerbate my sensory issues and overwhelm me. (Autistic individual)⁴⁰

To manage these barriers to employment, auticon employs qualified job coaches to design work environments that are suitable for both their consultants and their clients.

Job coaches also play a crucial role in mediating feedback between clients and consultants. They train client teams on how to interact effectively with the consultants. The ratio of consultants to coaches varies by country. In the UK, for example, 20 per cent of a coach's time is dedicated to delivering neuroinclusion services, which include maturity assessments, training and awareness generation sessions. On average, each coach supports eight consultants in the UK, although this ratio may be higher in markets with less demand for training and awareness initiatives.

Job coaches prepare IT consultants for the collaborative workplace by providing optimal working conditions, such as noise cancelling headphones, quiet places to work and breaks for stress management. Furthermore, the coaches are on hand to discuss any problems or situations that their IT consultants may find difficult to interpret. The coach prepares the consultants and meets with the client and our consultants on a regular basis, especially at the beginning of new assignments. This is crucial for understanding social cues and expectations on both sides.

For instance, when an autistic consultant was set to join a large banking group, the team informed him that he would receive credentials to access the learning management system to prepare for his assignment. However, the onboarding team sent him the credentials without specifying which courses he needed to complete before joining the organisation. This oversight happened a month before his assignment was due to begin. Remarkably, auticon's autistic consultant completed all 980 training modules before joining the client's cybersecurity team. Subsequently, auticon UK's CEO received a call from the chief people officer, who expressed a desire to speak with the consultant. Initially, the CEO was concerned that there might be an issue. However, the officer clarified that they had never encountered anyone who had completed all their educational training materials and wished to interview the consultant for feedback.

At the beginning of a project, our consultants are so eager to shine and impress that they might not sleep or skip meals. After two or three months, they can become overworked and burned out. The role of the job coach is not just to support our consultants but also to support the client team and explain that autistic people can be very literal in the way they communicate. (Andrea Girlanda, CEO, auticon UK)⁴¹

This story illustrates why coaching is not solely about supporting productivity, but also about reducing stress. The anecdote of another client at the UK subsidiary illustrates how coaches can help. The client called the office after a week to express concerns about the consultant. He said, 'This is not going well, and I don't think this is the right thing for us. I emailed your consultant at the beginning of the week, asking him to review a document, and I haven't heard from him yet.' Upon investigating, it was found that the consultant had indeed reviewed the document but had not communicated this back to the client. When the consultant was asked what happened and why he had not reverted to the client, the consultant replied: 'I wasn't asked to revert to the client. I was asked to review a document. I did it.'⁴²

This situation highlights the importance of clear and unambiguous communication that job coaches facilitate and support. As auticon UK's CEO Andrea Girlanda explained, for someone who thinks literally phrases like 'please do

the best you can as soon as possible' can lead to questions like: 'Can I sleep tonight? Can I eat? Does "as soon as possible" mean in 5 minutes, 1 hour or one day?' In general, many people cope with vague instructions by not taking them too seriously, often responding with, 'Yeah, sure, I'll do the best I can,' and then continuing with their day. However, autistic individuals take expectations very seriously and strive to meet them precisely.

We employ a lot of not just very talented and skilled individuals, but lovely human beings with a strong work ethic, who take their responsibilities very seriously, who are very keen to help. (Andrea Girlanda, CEO, auticon UK)⁴³

Chris, an IT consultant placed within an organisation by auticon provides an account of the vital role job coaches play in listening to his experiences and helping him to avoid masking⁴⁴ his autism.

On every step of the journey I have been supported by job coaches and other members of staff. No worry or concern that I have been ignored. Sometimes all I need is a friendly ear to listen as I organise my thoughts. None of it is judgemental, all of it is supportive.⁴⁵

Masking is the act of hiding or concealing one's traits during social interactions as a strategy to safeguard against potential negative social or employment-related outcomes. It is common for autistic people and can cause stress and even burnout. Even though masking is correlated with poorer mental health, it can also provide a coping or survival mechanism for those who do not receive support or adjustments in the workplace.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, according to a survey commissioned by auticon, 34 per cent of autistic professionals have never requested a reasonable adjustment, which is in line with the tech sector in general, where only 9 per cent of neurodivergent employees seek accommodations.⁴⁷ Interestingly though, seniority in the organisation has a significant impact on whether an employee requests reasonable adjustments. According to auticon's 2022 survey,⁴⁸ while an overwhelming majority of business owners (80 per cent) and senior managers (78 per cent) asked for reasonable adjustments, only 50 per cent of junior employees raised similar requests. Differences may be explained by concerns about perceptions, stigma or the uncertainty about needed adjustments. Hence it is crucial for organisations to create an inclusive environment, in which neurodivergent employees feel safe and accepted enough to be open about their needs.

I no longer go around trying to fit in, I just go around being myself – it's pretty incredible the difference it makes. (auticon consultant)⁴⁹

In their guide for managers, auticon provides concrete examples for reasonable adjustments in the workplace. These include offering flexible work arrangements, clear role definitions and processes that help to minimise stress and allow employees to focus on their tasks effectively, regular check-ins and task confirmation to prevent misunderstandings, provision of sensory adjustments and the promotion of collaboration and mentoring to support learning and development.

To ensure that the company is taking the right approach, relevant to their employees, it's essential to include neurodivergent employees in all decisions related to programmes and initiatives geared towards neuroinclusion. (Aleksander Oleszkiewicz, Director, auticon Labs)⁵⁰

Impact on individual lives and driving social change

Finding the right talent on the labour market is the third challenge that the organisation needs to manage to grow. With only a third of autistic people being in some form of employment, finding talent on the labour market is not straightforward. Most of auticon's current employees were either unemployed or underemployed before applying to their current position. Despite 88 per cent of their autistic consultants holding professional qualifications, including a bachelor's or higher degree, 64 per cent were unemployed, 10 per cent were underemployed, 8 per cent were engaged in training or education, and only 18 per cent were in some form of employment at the time of their application. Among the unemployed applicants, 55 per cent had been without a job for over a year.

I started living again. (auticon consultant)⁵¹

Given these figures, it is not surprising that in 2023, 78 per cent of their employees reported improved wellbeing, 77 per cent felt that they can be their authentic selves at work, 84 per cent feel valued for who they are, and 74 per cent felt more confident.⁵²

Besides improving the working conditions of their own autistic employees, the company also set out to demystify autism and showcase the benefits of neurodiversity to the wider society. According to their 2023 Global Impact Report, they aim to contribute to the global ESG agenda's 'social' dimension by championing practices that bring systemic change in the employment of neurodivergent individuals, while also positioning neurodiversity at the centre of the ESG agenda. By 2023, they delivered 274 neurodiversity awareness sessions around the world, trained 6000 people in 149 companies, delivered 402 projects and worked with 266 companies.

My understanding of how to work with different people has greatly changed and it has also shown me how much value there is in having very diverse teams. (Nick Byatt, service owner, PwC)⁵³

Their local offices have achieved national recognitions for their societal impact. The US subsidiary was selected as a leading disability employer by the National Organization on Disability in 2023, auticon Germany was among the top three finalists for the Impact of Diversity Awards 2023, while auticon UK ranked 9th in Newsweek's 100 Global Most Loved Workplaces.⁵⁴

Beyond hiring, the company improves autistic people's economic and social conditions. Through actionable neurodiversity training and consultancy services, auticon supports client organisations by establishing high-quality jobs and opportunities. This method allows people to develop lasting technology careers, boosting self-esteem and autonomy.

Besides social impact, their approach to business also drives growth. Their 2023 Impact Report highlights significant positive outcomes not only for the employees but also for the organisational culture, wellbeing and the satisfaction of their clients. They claim that 81 per cent of their client teams feel more confident working with autistic colleagues, 73 per cent report improved team culture, including clearer communication, better teamwork, increased empathy, and a greater sense of purpose, and 96 per cent of their clients value the consultants' contributions to their projects, especially their greater accuracy, alternative perspectives, innovative approaches and increased efficiency.

Conclusion

auticon's journey demonstrates how organisations can transform neurodiversity into a distinctive competitive advantage within the technology sector. While the company has established itself as the world's largest autistic-majority employer, it also faces complex challenges: balancing the supply and demand of neurodiverse talent; investing in specialised support systems; and addressing persistent social biases. auticon's comprehensive support mechanisms and unique value proposition has also positioned it as a global leader in inclusive business practices. Although organisations like auticon can only offer employment opportunities to a small fraction of the autistic community, they are driving meaningful change within one of the most competitive industries and beyond.

auticon sets a benchmark for other companies aiming to integrate neurodiversity into their workforce and plays a significant role in addressing the skills gap in the tech industry by tapping into the untapped potential of autistic talent. As a commercial enterprise, the company successfully balances social impact with market demands, demonstrating that placing neurodiversity at the core of business strategy can drive both innovation and sustainable growth. This model proves particularly valuable as organisations worldwide

face increasing technology skills shortages while seeking to build more inclusive workplaces.

Preparing the case

In preparing the case analysis you might like to consider the following questions in particular:

1. auticon challenges conventional notions of talent and skills by demonstrating that neurodiverse employees often possess exceptional abilities that are overlooked in traditional recruitment processes. What innovative recruitment and assessment methodologies can be implemented to identify and value diverse talent, and how can organisations ensure that these approaches remain fair and unbiased across all employee groups?
2. auticon's success illustrates the need for organisations to create adaptable structures that accommodate diverse working styles. How can organisations redesign their structures to accommodate diverse working styles without sacrificing effectiveness? What specific elements of organisational design, such as communication systems, workflows or team dynamics, should be adapted to support a truly inclusive environment?
3. Senior leaders at auticon play an active role in shaping and reinforcing a neuroinclusive culture. What concrete steps should senior leaders take to actively shape and sustain a neuroinclusive culture? To what extent can leadership's commitment to inclusion transform the organisation's culture?
4. auticon operates at the intersection of business and social mission, which raises questions about the tension between profitability and social impact. How should organisations that operate with a dual mission balance the pursuit of profit with their social responsibilities? How should companies prioritise when profitability and social impact seem to be in conflict?
5. The case underscores the importance of broader societal and governmental frameworks in promoting neuroinclusion. What role should governments, public policy and other stakeholders play in promoting neurodiversity in the workplace? How can organisations collaborate with external institutions to foster a neuroinclusive environment, and to what extent should companies rely on or resist external regulations in shaping their internal practices?

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