Specialisterne Scotland

Passion for Details

Autscape 2011

Who am I?

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Introduction

- Specialisterne is an IT services franchise which is run under a social enterprise model, but on business terms

- It sells IT services such as software testing and web development to other businesses – these are delivered either from Specialisterne's office or at client sites as appropriate

- At least 75% of the workforce at Specialisterne are autistic, or this will become the case as new positions are created – entry-level junior test analyst positions are reserved for autistic people, an example of positive discrimination

- Specialisterne franchises operate training & assessment programmes which support autistic people who are struggling to find work, either into work with Specialisterne, or if this isn't appropriate for them – providing guidance or referring them onwards to other support that may help in finding another employer

Origins

- Founded by Thorkil Sonne in Denmark in 2004 after his son Lars was diagnosed as autistic, when he found out what the prospects for autistic people could be

- Autistic people are underemployed in most societies, in many cases this is due to society's prejudice or the failure of many workplaces to make reasonable adaptations or even show basic tolerance and understanding

Origins [1]

- Thorkil came to the conclusion, from his experiences with his own son, and from wider evidence that autistic people were highly valuable as employees, with a select few being especially apt in the field of IT, in particular software testing – an area that benefits hugely from attention to detail and an enhanced ability to retain information

- He left his employer TDC, the main Danish telecommunications firm, and set up Specialisterne as a social enterprise

Why does Specialisterne exist?

- Specialisterne exists to give autistic people a fair chance to demonstrate our ability to contribute to society, as unique individuals with our own strengths and weaknesses. The business side of Specialisterne competes on market terms – it has to bring in revenue to survive.

- It aims to allow autistic people to maximise potential in the workplace by facilitating strengths and minimising obstacles, providing work for Specialisterne employees and championing inclusive recruitment and employment practices for all.

Thorkil Sonne

- 'Sonne views as the ideal outcome of this perceptual shift — that there will be no need for 'specialist' companies in the future, and inclusive hiring practices simply being a hallmark of successful businesses.'

"I didn't make the company for him [Lars]; he wants to do other things," Sonne admits, his tone a mixture of pride and amusement, before summarizing his parental and philanthropic hopes with characteristic simplicity — "All I want is that he'll be understood and respected for his skills and personality."

http://www.jobpostings.ca/article/autistic-revolution

Specialisterne Marketing

- Autistic people have a lot to offer the workplace
- Many autistic people have skills and abilities relating to our cognitive differences that are particularly suited to IT

Specialisterne Marketing[1]

- High levels of concentration;
- Reliability and consistent accuracy;
- Close attention to detail;
- The ability to identify errors;
- Excellent memory;
- Creativity.

Today

- Specialisterne has provided assessment and training for 155 individuals with an ASD diagnosis since 2004, and as of 2011 for 12 more in Scotland. The recruitment process is on going and is starting for the first time in Iceland

- Currently employs 40 consultants with an ASD in Denmark, and 9 analysts in Scotland

Specialisterne Scotland's Goals

- To employ 61 people, at least 50 of whom will be autistic, at a market-rate wage between 2010-15.

- To successfully replicate the Specialisterne business model, creating a new, sustainable social enterprise with a projected annual turnover of £1.6m by financial year 2014/15.

- To integrate at least 50% of autistic staff into a mainstream work environment by spending the majority of working time on customer premises.

Example Adjustments

- Different areas of the office have different lighting arrangements to suit individual's own sensitivities - choice of rooms with natural lighting or interior space
- Temperature regulation
- Office layout consideration
- Working hours can be negotiated between 20 and 37.5
- Sympathetic management
- Negotiation of appropriate adjustments as required at client sites
- Desk notifications (similar to Autscape lanyards)
- 'ASD days' – special leave if employees need to de-stress (due to autism-related issues)

Software Testing

- The process of studying computer software to identify faults or other unknowns, during its initial development and beyond

- Often very rigorous, methodical work that requires a very high level of concentration and persistence

- In general, the demands of this work are such that it may be more suited to an autistic person than it is to someone who is neurotypical

Web Development

- Building and maintaining web presences for clients
- Sites which are static and sites which the customer can edit themselves
- Requires knowledge of web technologies, from programming languages through to databases, and content management systems

Just Enterprise

Other Skills

- Graphic design
- Computer networking and administration
- Hardware and software maintenance
- Management

Training & Assessment Programme

- Twelve places on each 4-5 month cycle – recruitment to the assessment programme is competitive with the most suitable applicants being selected

- Any formally diagnosed autistic person aged 16 or over who can work in the UK is eligible to apply

- From then on all 12 candidates can expect to be employed if they perform in the training – with an anticipated success rate of 85-90%.

Successful candidates

- Have a basic understanding of how a work place operates.
- Can focus and complete tasks within a given time frame.
- Have the ability to report, follow directions and instructions and make plans with support from managers.
- Require a certain degree of multi tasking ability.
- Require basic cooperative skills to interact with colleagues.
- Require the ability to keep appointments and promises to customers/partners.
- Has an understanding of what is needed to work with customers.
- Can identify and propose new solutions and ideas to solving and improving given tasks.
- Can demonstrate an interest in Information Technology (IT).
- Have the general capacity to understand and handle complex data and information.

"Owning Autism"

Some thoughts relating to the Autscape 2011 theme

Discussion later . . .