

The FUTURE of WORK

OPEN OFFICE

What happens when people who have trouble fitting into a traditional workplace get one designed just for them?

By SUSAN DOMINUS

Photograph by RYAN PFLUGER

BEFORE BEN HIRASUNA showed up for the first job interview of his life, he went for weeks at a time without leaving his parents' home in Santa Monica. Outside, sun poured down; inside, he looked at the top of his forearm and noticed it was every bit as pale as its underside. To say Hirasuna is shy is to say the ocean is big — it captures nothing of the vastness of the feeling. He managed to attend college at Arizona State for just over a year but returned home for good in November 2017. For a few months, he took some classes at a local community college, but eventually his routine gave way to solitude at home. During the day, he slept; at night he rose to battle the enemy in futuristic cities and pastel landscapes on his

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or at McDonald's, if it came to that.

Hirasuna could not imagine a worse hell than a job in customer service, which would require, he sensed, a more cheerful public face than he could possibly muster. He remembered that in September, he went to an innovation fair at his old high school and met the head of a technology consulting business called Auticon, which specializes in hiring people who are, like Hirasuna, on the autism spectrum. He made an appointment with a recruiter at the office, and in early January, he forced himself to make the 10-minute drive to Auticon's office two blocks from the beach. After going upstairs to the right floor, he stood outside the door of the office, stymied by what to do next.

Given a few hours, Hirasuna could usually make sense of whatever computer code someone threw at him, but this particular script was elusive. Did he open the door and barge right in? "It seemed kind of rude," Hirasuna said. "Like, 'Hey, here I am!'" A mass of soft, pale brown curls surrounds his head, cloudlike. As he recalled this moment of indecision, he reached up and pulled on a strand of hair a few times. "It was like my brain threw the blue screen of death on me," he recalled. Was he supposed to wait right there for someone to open the door? What if they were busy with another appointment at that moment and he interrupted or even ruined it? Hesitating in the hall, he feared he would just stand there forever, blowing what seemed like such a good opportunity — to do work he might actually like — in a disastrous moment of total self-conflagration, his head exploding with uncertainty. And then it happened. Someone opened the door.

Offices, for plenty of people, can occasionally be overwhelming, crowded with feelings too big for cubicles, too personal for a professional setting. A higher-up checks a watch midconversation; a comment in a meeting is talked over; someone and someone else go to lunch. Doubts flourish under fluorescent lights that expose every slight, every interpersonal hurdle.

And then there are people like Hirasuna, who are on the autism spectrum; people who feel bombarded by those same clues and cues, all the while knowing they are unreliable interpreters of their meaning. For some people with autism, socializing is an elaborate game with more exceptions than rules, so that any small decision — hover outside the boss's office? don't

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employee on the spectrum who graduated from the University of California, Riverside, last spring and who, like Hirasuna, started working at Auticon in January. “It’s moving in the dark without a flashlight.”

The challenges of navigating the social complexities of a workplace is one reason unemployment even among college-educated people with autism appears to be disproportionately high. No good national data exist, but various small studies suggest the problem of joblessness is chronic, says Paul Shattuck, a professor of public health at Drexel University who studies autism outcomes. Anxiety, commonly experienced in people with autism, can make typical workplace competition unbearable; one Auticon employee, in a BBC report, compared his experience at his last job to the television show “Survivor.” The interview process alone is a sociability test that many people with autism are destined to fail or inclined to avoid altogether. (Some members of the autism community prefer to be described as “autistic.” Others, including those I interviewed at Auticon, preferred to be described as “on the spectrum” or as “a person with autism.” “Just don’t call me late for dinner,” said one who did not have a preference.)

Major technology businesses like Microsoft and SAP have made significant efforts over the past several years to hire more people with strong cognitive skills who are on the spectrum, recognizing that they represent untapped potential in the job market. Human-resource departments have modified interview processes, trained staff to accommodate certain sensitivities (to sounds or disruptions) and helped co-workers and managers adjust to those colleagues’ needs (for example, closer supervision). Auticon goes one step further; it is an office where people who have autism are a majority. Employees on the spectrum do not make up a pod within a company; instead, they define the predominant culture.

Many businesses that recruit people with autism specialize, like Auticon, in quality assurance, which is like a poultry-inspection service for software. Is the log-in working on the home page? What happens if someone right-clicks on this other link? The work can be rote and entry-level or require more skilled analysts to write scripts that test that software automatically, “essentially to see if I can break it,” as Hirasuna put it.

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securing his children's future. He knew they were smart and capable; he also knew, as he put it, "that they present themselves in ways that may not be corporate-America kinds of ways." He moved his family from St. Louis, where he had been the chief financial officer of an industrial-product business, and started over in Santa Monica, to create a software quality-assurance business that expanded its offerings over time. With a few partners, he founded MindSpark as a California benefit corporation, a type of for-profit business. It is founded on the radical proposition that social purpose and employee well-being are as essential to their mission as profit. Within five years, the business was thriving, with two offices, one in Culver City and the other in Santa Monica. The company had about 32 employees, ranging from entry-level trainees to skilled automation analysts, all of whom were on the spectrum, as well as about seven neurotypical managers and administrators. (With time, says Rebecca Beam, Auticon's president, the company hopes to promote current analysts into more managerial roles, breaking down that division.) In 2018, Auticon, a German company based in Munich, a business also devoted to employing people on the spectrum, acquired Benoist's start-up.

The name MindSpark nicely matched the feel-good ingenuity of the business; Auticon, on the other hand, summons the image of an army of automatons, defined by their diagnoses and marketed to deliver maximum software efficiency. Auticon's marketing material names "pattern recognition" and "uncompromised honesty" as valued skill sets in autistic people. In fact, research is mixed on whether people with autism actually do excel at visual pattern recognition, relative to peers of equivalent I.Q., and the range of talents (and honesty) is highly individual. Selling autism as a brand likely perpetuates some generalizations — even stereotypes — in the name of overcoming bias, a complicated compromise, if a strategic one.

A business full of people who are on the autism spectrum provides its own kinds of managerial and interpersonal challenges, but to be the norm in an office, rather than an exception, is an unqualified relief for many of Auticon's employees. Hirasuna noticed the difference in the first week of work, when he was writing an email to his manager. "I realized after the first day, Oh, yeah, I don't have to read this over for nuance and all that stuff," he said. In college, he hated emailing his professors, because he agonized over whether his tone was too forceful or too presumptuous or too

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Hirasuna said with a big, comedic shrug. “O.K. — that’s what we expected!”

One morning in late January at a daily status meeting at Auticon’s Culver City office, Mirzat Musayaf, a manager, gathered a group of four software analysts in the conference room to find out where things stood on a project for a major client. As the meeting began, Kayla, 59, one of the more outgoing members of the office and an informal leader, rocked gently back and forth at the conference table. (She asked that only her first name be used.) Kayla was not offended when Musayaf, whose workstation is across from her own, first placed another computer monitor next to her first one, so her frequent movement would not distract him. “Oh, it drives my husband crazy, too,” she assured him. “But it helps me concentrate.” (Bill Gates is also known to rock during meetings; a 1990 Fortune article noted that some of his employees, when engaging in intense conversation, did the same, as if emulating his movement.)

Musayaf’s agenda that day included addressing any mistakes that had been made over the past week. Kayla believed a colleague, who was also sitting at the table, had digressed from instructions directing analysts to notate a certain task in a specific way. As the conversation turned to that issue, the colleague started wringing his hands. His lower jaw jutted out, and he gritted his teeth. He asked a question, then smiled with vindication upon hearing the answer. “O.K.,” he said, then leaned in and pointed a finger at Kayla: she was at fault for this issue, he explained, not him. The issue was minor, his reaction stark and defensive; no self-conscious joke or neutral professionalism defanged his point. It was a classic office dynamic playing out in raw, unedited form.

Later, in an email to me, Kayla wrote that although she could see how someone neurotypical might interpret his reaction as hostile, she, as someone also on the spectrum, did not. “I knew that he was showing no anger or malice toward me,” she wrote. “We understand and respect each other.”

Musayaf interpreted the moment of tension in the meeting as essentially harmless; he understood the colleague’s strong reaction as a symptom of anxiety rather than an unlikable character trait. Musayaf, like the other managers, known as leads, had received a few three-hour training sessions

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his team well.

Musayaf could see that even after the conversation had moved on, Kayla's colleague was still distressed. Musayaf stopped the discussion to make a point. "Look," he said, "there is no correct way, or incorrect." He explained, gently, that his only objective was to keep the project on track. The colleague visibly relaxed.

A culture of acceptance occasionally conflicts with a training environment intended to prepare the staff for the possibility of working in a more typical office. Rebecca Beam, a longtime tech recruiter who became president of Auticon when the company acquired MindSpark last year, sensed early on that many Auticon employees felt uneasy when she stopped by their desks in the morning with a big hello. Many of them were uncomfortable with small talk; they had no interest in rehashing their weekends or looking at pictures of Ziggy, Beam's terrier mix; but Beam saw a morning greeting as the bare minimum of office socializing, a nicety they might as well endure, if only for practice.

Before working for the company, Beam had no personal connection to someone with autism but believes all individuals deserve work worthy of their talents. She joined the advisory board of MindSpark at its founding and relied on her longstanding business contacts to bring in major clients like Fox and Warner Brothers. But before she was put in charge of Auticon's United States business in June 2018, she hadn't known the staff well enough to realize, as she eventually did, that every decision, no matter how small, mattered.

In her first weeks on the job, Beam made what turned out to be a bold move: She gave the Santa Monica office a small makeover, trying to brighten it with some new furniture for the front entryway, a smattering of succulents, some framed posters of illustrated animals. Over a weekend, she also had a wall, once white, painted gray.

That Monday, Max Gadson, a 24-year-old analyst who has been with the company for two years, arrived at the office and stopped short, taking in all this newness. He knew something was happening — they had been told to clear their desks — but no one knew exactly what. No one said anything about the wall being painted, much less that it would be gray, and here it

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wall color had changed and sought out his supervisor to talk it through.

Another co-worker, Gray Benoist Jr. (the son of MindSpark's founder), who is 31, took issue with a new patterned chair now placed in the entry area. The chair would later prove popular — some staff members avoid the small couch opposite the chair, for fear someone will sit too close to them — but certainly, in the beginning, Beam could tell some employees were out of sorts. One analyst asked why she insisted on placing succulents in the Culver City office when, as he sees it, they were so clearly superfluous. On another occasion, she moved a young man's desk without consulting him, and he temporarily quit. For most of Beam's staff, she realized over time, there is no such thing as a pleasant surprise (unless it's pizza).

“People with my type of disorder, it's not that we don't have emotion,” Gadson said. “It's that we have too much emotion. We can't push that stuff back.”

Beam, as she started to understand the office's workings, gave a lot of thought, in her first month, to the size of a couch she was buying for a conference room in Culver City, until the question was no longer about a couch and more about a culture. She knew that if she bought one that was long, employees would sleep on it and not just doze, sitting, with their eyes closed, but stretch out and slumber deeply. Many of her employees have poor sleep habits; some are on medication that can affect their sleep. (Around half of adults with autism also have a mental diagnosis of a psychiatric condition like anxiety or depression, according to a 2015 Kaiser Permanente study of 1,500 people on the autism spectrum.) Would Auticon, going forward, be a place where you could regularly lie down and nap during lunch in the conference room, so long as you made it back to your desk on time? Or was it going to be a place where that was considered inappropriate? In the end, Beam decided to lean into the workplace as an accommodating space: She bought the big couch. At lunch, someone is usually napping on it, even when other employees are playing Ping-Pong on the conference table, their jackets strewn across it for a net.

Accommodations that would seem unusual at another office seem perfectly reasonable to the employees at Auticon. At the Culver City office, overhead lights bothered one or two colleagues so much that everyone agreed to work without artificial lights, so that often, by the end of the day, they are

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population that often experiences depression. Managers adjust, within reason, to their employees' boundaries, rather than the other way around, such as when employees suffering from gastrointestinal problems — a little-understood but common issue for some people on the spectrum — call in to explain, in great detail, why they won't be coming in that day. Another employee had disappeared, without notice, for several days, and his managers were afraid for his safety. "You know, some employers would say to someone like that, 'I'm done,'" Beam said. "But I'm going to work with that person and work with that person, because I see the potential."

Beam frequently checks in with Emily Gale, a behavior analyst who consults for Auticon and specializes in autism in the workplace. Gale, in one instance, came in to help resolve an issue with an employee who always said he understood the feedback he was getting on a given task but never actually executed it successfully. "It was clear that the analyst was getting so anxious — I could see it — that he wasn't able to process what it was he was being told," she said. He was rubbing his hands on his knees, rocking, repeating back words without seeming to grasp the context. Ultimately, they worked out a system in which the lead would ask fewer open-ended questions to confirm that the employee understood, and the analyst, instead of being expected to express any uncertainty or confusion during the conversation, would ask follow-up questions by email or Slack. The lead also provided a written cheat sheet with instructions, rather than having the staff member take notes while listening. The lead reported to Gale the following week that he had a better sense of what the analyst did and did not understand and could therefore address it.

Some Auticon employees have skills that would likely earn them higher pay were they employed at a big company in the United States. But Auticon invests heavily in their training and offers the kind of bespoke workplace systems that allow for their success, even for analysts in entry-level jobs. It employs analysts with advanced degrees from top universities and people who failed to make it through college, people whose minds work at high operating speed and some with short-term memory challenges (and some with both). Somehow the balance of talents and abilities keeps the operation afloat.

"I kind of like it here," Hirasuna said, a month into his job. He was learning new programming skills he wouldn't have acquired on his own. He felt the

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At the Culver City Auticon office one evening in January, several employees took turns playing Super Smash Brothers Ultimate in the conference room during a staff party, while a software analyst sat silently, unmoving, unspeaking, watching for the duration of the two-hour gathering; another played alone at his desk on an Xbox One he had brought with him.

In the middle of the main room, several colleagues and Beam were competing in a brainy board game called Scrutineyes, a sophisticated version of I Spy in which competitors name objects on the board that start with a certain letter. “Horus,” said one competitor named Will Collett, 31, recognizing the half-falcon, half-man image of the Egyptian god. He spotted a medieval weapon: “Halberd.” Before he worked at Auticon, Collett’s previous jobs were selling vacuum cleaners door to door and then working at a fast-food restaurant, which refused to promote him for reasons he is still not sure he grasps.

A few feet from that game, Grey Patton sat on a small bench near the door. Patton, sweet-faced and floppy-haired, his forehead showing a sheen of perspiration from the stress of the party, needed to sit somewhat apart to stay calm in an office full of people talking and moving in unpredictable directions and playing video games at high volume. As a college student, he said, he attended a party — once. “It felt really claustrophobic,” he said. “I was like, O.K., I think I’ve had enough.” He had come to this party mostly for the pepperoni pizza, which he was now eating in peace. Patton could at least be fairly sure, at Auticon, that no one would pressure him to join the fun or even wonder why he did not.

The night of the party, Auticon employees could see, if they walked along an outdoor corridor on the way to the bathroom, another office across a courtyard. Its conference room was brightly lit and crowded with about 15 well-dressed employees. The office was the corporate headquarters of a fast-casual vegetarian-restaurant business, and its employees looked well suited to the work — fit, tan but not too tan, as if they had all chosen just the right amount of S.P.F. One person was usually talking at a time; everyone else looked listless. The darker it got outside and the longer the meeting lasted, the more tempting it was for someone walking by to stare into the bright room. The office space looked like a diorama of the world’s

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The next evening, the same people seemed to have gathered for yet another meeting in that same bright room. In the Auticon office, across the way, the room was, at 5:30, silent and dark, so dark you actually might want a flashlight to move across it. Earlier in the day, the room, though quiet, practically vibrated with an intense sense of collective focus; by early evening, that concentration was giving way to a more meditative energy. Kayla interrupted the silence with a burst of laughter. She had been telling her colleague — the one who had bristled in the meeting — that her son had used small metal numbers to post the number representing pi up to 15 digits on the back of her car. The colleague sent a message on Slack: “I prefer this number: 3.87298334621.” The note made her laugh, even though she wasn’t sure what it meant. “It’s the square root of 15,” he told her. She burst out laughing again.

The conversation turned to the meeting happening across the courtyard, which seemed to have struck a few people the same way: with a feeling of sympathy. They had to execute tasks at Auticon, but they did not have to perform charm, to fake engagement at an intolerably endless meeting. “Don’t they look miserable?” Beam said. Kayla was indignant. “You know that at least some of them are introverts,” she said. This seemed like unnatural torture to her, what those employers were doing. It was almost as if they didn’t think their employees had feelings.

Susan Dominus is a staff writer for the magazine. She last wrote about the psychologist Walter Mischel.

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