Autism's Assets

Larry Clay's Story

Larry Clay greeted his new supervisor with an unaffected enthusiasm that left the man momentarily speechless. "Good morning, Mr. Michael. I haven't seen you in a while!" he said, in rapid staccato.

It had been years since they met at a professional training session. "How is Valerie? Are you still driving the grey, 2008 Nissan Quest with the two DVD players and the cream interior?" Larry's eyes remained fixed on the wall as he continued to recall details about their first meeting.

Harold Michael scratched his head and wondered how this young man remembered the name of his wife, and details about the car he drove two years earlier. It was unusual. It would be useful.

Larry did what came naturally to someone who brings together an interest in people with a superior, long-term memory. He retrieved information that many of us would not have stored in the first place. It's not unusual for coworkers to be pleasantly surprised when Larry remembers something unique that makes them feel visible. It is this skill that helps set him apart at work. But it is not his only asset.

> *"I'm learning to be more independent!"*

Novel neurology. Novel thinking. Novel solutions.

Larry Clay belongs to a cohort of young people with a developmental disability that has been misunderstood for decades. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is an umbrella term for a group of complex disorders of brain and nervous system development. It is characterized by difficulties with social interaction, communication, and controlling certain body movements. Many people with ASD experience their five senses differently, with sensitivities to noise, crowds or bright lights. Imagine living in a body that does not cooperate with your intent; reacting outside your control in public or social

Innovative Employers Embrace Autism

As the need for innovation is alive and well in the US economy, some savvy employers realize that "neurological diversity" can be good for business. SAP, the world's third largest software firm, recently announced their intention to hire hundreds of ASD workers. "People affected by autism bring… tremendous capabilities that are important for us as an IT company," says Jose Velasco, who heads up SAP's Autism at Work Initiative. Velasco and his colleagues see assets where others see disability. He points out that strong visual memory, the ability to recognize patterns and spot deviations in data and low tolerance for mistakes "… are all attributes that will add value in our field. There is a great potential here to lower costs and improve customer satisfaction," he notes. Qualities like these, as well as an ability to approach problems in a creative or counterintuitive way make some people with ASD potentially attractive employees. The Israeli army has recognized this as well. Israel Defense Forces (IDF) Intelligence Unit 9900, made up of soldiers on the spectrum with specialized visual and analytical skills, is highly regarded for the unique work they do for the army.

Some employers who recognize assets that can go with autism include the Arc, Aspiritech, the US Federal Government, CVS, Goodwill Industries, IDF, Lowes, Sam's Club, SAP, Specialisterne, and Walgreens. To learn more, see sources listed at the end of this feature.

settings. This is what many individuals with ASD describe. It's no wonder anxiety is prevalent among people on the spectrum.

Because of the complexity of ASD, consensus has not been reached about the causes of, or biology underlying the disorders. People on the spectrum have a nervous system that causes them to experience their environment differently and think about things in ways that are hard for others to conceive. Some say it feels like they are living on an alien planet, trying to make sense of social interactions among what they call "neurotypical" humans. (The autism community coined the term "neurotypical" to describe someone who is not on the autism spectrum.)

Living with ASD is not easy. But the novel neurology that goes with it can cut both ways. Employers are starting to see real value in some of the characteristics that often accompany autism. One person's "obsessive compulsive disorder" (OCD) is another person's unwavering attention to detail. For example, as one employer noted,

"Historically, there seemed to be a certain perception of this population as being incapable of performing corporate level work," Freddie Mac's diversity manager Stephanie Roemer told Reuters. "In reality, people on the spectrum offer so much to an organization willing to think outside of the box and view this cadre of talent as a 'value add'."

Autism: the unknown

Carmencita Clay did not see her son's autism as an asset when he was diagnosed in 1991. She remembers being concerned about Larry as a small child because it took a long time for him to learn how to walk; use his hands like other children did; speak in complete sentences, or play with other children. They brought him to Child Find Pre-School Diagnostic Center for an evaluation.

Carmencita's concerns about her son's future reflected the bleak outlook for so many people with autism years ago. Larry began receiving Supplemental Security Income (SSI) when he was 18 and his family was glad he received this support from Social Security. He was fortunate to have been brought up by caring, involved parents who devoted their time and energy to making sure he had the support he would need to lead a fulfilling life. Preparation for the workforce was an important part of this support system. Grateful that the reality of his life today bears little resemblance to her worst fears, Carmencita credits family, clinicians, educators and a team of employment support providers with Larry's achievements in the workforce so far.

"When we got the diagnosis, all of a sudden everything went dark," she recalls. "I was numb. I didn't understand. I was afraid Larry would suffer... that he might be institutionalized. It was devastating."

Find Benefits Counseling Help

Benefits counselors (also known as benefits advisors) are professionals who can explain how Social Security Work Incentives apply to you. Professionals who have completed Social Security-sponsored training that qualifies them to offer benefits counseling are known as "Community Work Incentives Coordinators" (CWICs).

Community-based organizations known as "Work Incentives Planning and Assistance Projects" (WIPA), have CWICs on staff. A CWIC can help you learn about Work Incentives and understand how work will affect your benefits. To find a provider that offers benefits counseling, visit www.socialsecurity.gov/work and use the "Find Help" tool. Use the "Advanced Search" feature to pinpoint services tailored to you. Select "Work Incentives Counseling" on the services menu to begin your search.

For help, you can also call the Ticket to Work Help Line at **1-866-968-7842 (V) or 1-866-833-2967 (TTY)**.

It takes a village... a Ticket to Work and a few Work Incentives

Public school staff in Fairfax County, Virginia worked with Larry to help him recognize his strengths and interests. They focused on the "soft skills" such as teamwork, professional appearance and demeanor that are essential to success in the workplace. Larry spent time with his high school transition counselor, Clement Castellano, discussing his plans for employment. Castellano understood he needed to teach the unwritten rules of becoming a valued employee; and this meant first placing Larry in a setting where he could learn the ropes.

Larry's transition counselor collaborated with Virginia's state Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) agency to prepare Larry for work. They began by educating his family about Social Security's Ticket to Work program. Larry was eligible to receive individualized counseling and assistance that would help him get ready for the workforce and find a job. These services, which are free through Ticket to Work, are available to individuals age 18 through 64 who receive Social Security disability benefits. Through the Ticket program, Larry would receive career counseling, job training, assistance navigating a job hunt, job coaching, and other individualized services to help him succeed on the job. He was eager to get started. But he had to first learn how employment would affect his Social Security disability benefits.

Like many people considering employment, Larry was concerned about his benefits. He learned from a trained professional (known as a benefits counselor) that Social Security rules called Work Incentives allow many people to transition into the workforce while continuing to receive healthcare benefits (Medicaid and/or Medicare) and some cash benefits from Social Security. Because each person's circumstances are different, consulting a benefits counselor can be helpful, enabling people to make informed decisions about work. Once Larry's family understood what working would mean for his benefits, he was ready to explore his employment options.

The soft stepping stone

With help from VA's VR and the Fairfax County school transition team, Larry decided he would be well-suited for office work. When he was 18, they set him up in an internship, where he would learn to complete administrative tasks while developing the soft skills he needed for long-term success at work. VR provided a personal job coach who would get to know Larry, accompany him on the job, and help him use the strategies he was taught to problem-solve in a professional setting.

ServiceSource, a non-profit organization that supports individuals with disabilities, had an opening for a part-time administrative intern. ServiceSource helps people with disabilities find and maintain employment at other organizations. But they also had a need for administrative help in their Alexandria, VA office. So they offered Larry his first job. It was a good learning environment. He gained confidence in his technical skills while learning to decode the unwritten rules of "neurotypical" interaction at the office. It didn't take long for his co-workers to notice the assets he brought with him to work.

About ServiceSource

ServiceSource is a leading nonprofit disability resource organization that serves individuals with disabilities through a range of employment, training, rehabilitation, housing and other support services. ServiceSource directly employs more than 1,500 individuals on government and commercial affirmative employment contracts, making this agency one of the largest employers of people with disabilities nationwide. Strategic partnerships with local community businesses, government entities and nonprofits help bridge the gaps for individuals with disabilities, creating sustainable opportunities that benefit the entire community and result in greater independence for the individual.

ServiceSource is also an authorized provider of employment support services through Social Security's Ticket to Work program. Hundreds of Ticket to Work service providers across the country (known as "Employment Networks" or ENs) work with Ticket program participants to help them prepare for, find and maintain employment. Most ENs are not also employers. But ServiceSource is both!

To learn more visit www.servicesource.org

Clement Castellano helps prospective employers that are new to understanding autism see the value in traits that can be real strengths in a vocational setting. He articulates Larry's strengths well.

"When applied to digitizing paper files or organizing materials, Larry's precision, attention to detail and work ethic are a bonus," he says. "He craves the structure of a task with a beginning, a middle, and an end. Leaving a job incomplete would make him uncomfortable. Larry's unwavering focus on the work means an employer can rely on him in a way they may not be able to with a worker that is more interested in socializing or watching the clock."

Jan Williams, Larry's supervisor at ServiceSource, described how he impressed her and other staff. "When Larry completed one job, he went to others in the office and asked what else he could do to help. He was always looking for more work to do. The sense of accomplishment and pride he took away… knowing he did a good job was palpable," she recalls.

By the summer of 2010, Larry had completed his internship and developed a reputation as a strong, reliable employee. "The room was a little sunnier when he was here," says Williams.

An opportunity

When Larry was ready to find full-time work, his VR counselor helped him navigate a job hunt. They met every week to review leads, hone interview skills, and schedule appointments. In 2011, Larry had the break he was looking for. He landed a job working at The Mark Center (a US Department of Defense facility). Larry is part of a team that sets up the center's 27 conference rooms for daily government meetings. The job requires planning logistics, strong visual memory, quantitative concepts, attention to detail, and customer service skills he is glad he had a chance to cultivate in his earlier job training.

Harold Michael, Larry's supervisor at The Mark Center, says he is a valuable asset to the team. "Larry has an outstanding work ethic, is energetic, and a good model for others," Michael says. He points out that Larry's ability to visualize patterns and make quick calculations in his head allow him to fill orders efficiently. He has learned to accept and apply input from co-workers, and his interest in people helped him in the customer service aspects of the job. "He has an uncanny memory for people's names. It never fails to put a smile on their face. Customers enjoy Larry and so do his co-workers," Michael says.

Find an Employment Network

Visit www. socialsecurity. gov/work and use the "Find Help" tool, or call the Ticket to Work Help Line and ask for a list of ENs that serve your area.

VR + EN Partnership Plus

Partnership Plus: A Continuum of Support

Many people like Larry need ongoing support that will allow them to remain employed and increase their earnings over time. Larry's VR counselor explained that his state VR agency could help him find work. But three months after he started a new job, support services from VR would come to an end. That's why VR agencies often collaborate with Ticket to Work service providers known as Employment Networks (ENs). Through the Ticket program, VR agencies and ENs both offer services that help people prepare for and find work. ENs also provide the continuing "post-employment" support services that set people up for success and enable career development. Some program participants choose to work with an EN from the beginning. Others find a job with help from VR and then, after VR has closed their case, use their Ticket to work with an EN. This arrangement, known as "Partnership Plus," gives Ticket to Work program participants continued access to individualized employment support services, should they need them.

Larry worked with the high school transition office and his state VR agency to gain office work skills through an internship at ServiceSource, and then find a permanent job at The Mark Center. After he worked for three months at The Mark Center, his VR case was closed. Larry decided to work with an EN that could offer job coaching and other post-employment support services to help him succeed on the job. Ordinarily, he might have shopped around for ENs that served his region. But Larry didn't have to look any further than ServiceSource. In addition to being his first employer, ServiceSource is also an EN that has a Partnership Plus agreement with Virginia's state VR agency. Most ENs are not also employers. But ServiceSource is a large organization that employs people with disabilities, and collaborates with local agencies to help youth in transition like Larry find work. He was familiar with ServiceSource from his time as an intern, and knew the staff there would be well-equipped to support his career growth.

"I'm learning to be more independent!" he says with pride. "I take public transportation and plan my own meals. I have my own credit card and I stick to a budget..."

Independence

Like other young graduates, Larry is enjoying the sense of achievement he gets from a paycheck and the responsibilities that go with full-time employment. He has left his SSI cash benefits behind, and feels great about himself and his job.

"Work has really improved Larry's outlook," Carmencita adds. "It has made him more confident. He enjoys being part of a team; has learned about flexibility and getting along with different kinds of people at work. Employment has made Larry a happier, healthier person... and Ticket to Work helped him get here!"

Sources:
SAP Autism at Work Initiative public information session held in Newtown, PA on May 1, 2014

"Autism in the workplace: Companies seek out autistic workers to fuel innovation with neurological diversity" Reuters June 4, 2013

(http://www.nydailynews.com/life-style/health/companies-seek-autistic-workers-fuel-innovation-article-1.1362853#ixzz38K0EyDiy)

"Autism in the IDF: Meet the Soldiers of Intelligence Unit 9900"- April 10, 2014

(http://www.idfblog.com/blog/2014/04/10/autism-idf-meet-soldiers-intelligence-unit-9900/)

"Young Adults with Autism Seek Out White-Collar Careers for First Time" Huffington Post 3-20-13

(http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/09/27/autism-employment-white-collar-jobs_n_1916611.html)

"The Arc and Specialisterne USA Work Together on US Expansion of Model to Employ People with Autism in Tech Industry" The Arc blog Jan 22, 2014 (http://blog.thearc.org/2014/01/22/arc-specialisterne-usa-work-together-us-expansion-model-employ-people-autism-tech-industry/)

www.embracing-autism.net

Ticket to Work

With the right support, Larry found his path to a better future. Find yours.
To learn more, call the Ticket to Work Help Line at **1-866-968-7842 (V)**; **866-833-2967 (TTY)**, or visit **www.socialsecurity.gov/work.**