



ED Now Feature | Filling Jobs, Expanding Opportunities: A Win-Win for Employers and People on the Autism Spectrum

tags: [equity](#), [inclusion](#), [talent](#), [underemployment](#), [workforce development](#), [workforce participation](#)

By Sarah Kenney-Cruz, Delaware Prosperity Partnership

As the labor market has tightened, employers across the country have become more creative in order to fill open positions. They have implemented internships, allowed flexible scheduling and tried other strategies, but many are still searching for talent.

If you ask IT industry veteran Ernie Dianastasis, one answer to the talent shortage is straightforward: Employing individuals who are on the autism spectrum. That's one in 59 Americans.



“More than 80 percent of people with autism in the country are either unemployed or underemployed, making them a significant, untapped, and potentially high-performing labor force,” Dianastasis says. “In a world where the focus is increasingly on skills versus degrees, where remote work is increasingly the norm, and where precision matters, individuals on the autism spectrum are ideal prospects to fill the talent gap.”

In 2016, Dianastasis founded The Precisionists, Inc. (TPI), a benefit corporation headquartered in Wilmington, Delaware, that delivers administrative and technology services via teams that include individuals with disabilities.

Three years later, Dianastasis has expanded with Innovation & Technology Centers (TPI work sites) in other markets, including Nashville and Phoenix. The employers TPI supports include UBS, M&T Bank, Independence Blue Cross, and Delmarva Power.

TPI currently employs more than 100 individuals with disabilities across these three sites. But they are just laying the foundation: The goal is to create over 10,000 jobs for adults with autism and other developmental disabilities by 2025.

About the model

Applicants come to TPI from a variety of backgrounds. Some are just out of high school, while others have undergraduate or even graduate degrees. Some have jobs, but are drastically underutilized in their roles. Others are unemployed, never having been seriously considered by potential employers.

“We’ve had people who were borderline homeless and others who were Stanford grads from affluent backgrounds,” Dianastasis says.

TPI recruits applicants based on customer demand. After they are recruited, there is a two- to four-week assessment period to understand each applicant’s capabilities and needs.

“A typical job interview may be hard for them,” says Dianastasis. “So to better ascertain our candidates’ skill sets, we have them perform professional workplace-simulated projects, revealing both their preference for independent versus group work and their technical skills.”

The recruits receive continual professional development while they are being evaluated. Ultimately, they become TPI employees and are assigned to employers for project-based or longer-term work.

Critical partnerships

Key to TPI’s success has been finding the right partners. In Arizona, that has been First Place AZ, a real estate and community development nonprofit that provides housing and wraparound support for people with disabilities.

This summer, First Place-Phoenix marks its one-year anniversary as a supportive housing apartment building, totaling 81,000 sq. ft. with capacity for 79 residents. “We focus on real estate, but we know that our residents also needed places to learn, recreate, worship, and most importantly, work,” says founder Denise Resnik.

Resnik and Dianastasis met at a conference in Florida, and quickly realized the potential for a real partnership. In February of this year, Arizona Governor Doug Ducey held a press conference at First Place announcing the Phoenix Precision Project, a partnership of The Precisionists, Salt River Project, the Greater Phoenix Chamber of Commerce, the Greater Phoenix Economic Council, and First Place AZ, which aims to fill 500 positions in Arizona in the next three to five years.

TPI associates are identified, assessed, trained, and employed by The Precisionists and carry out project-based work, including software development, software testing, database analytics, cybersecurity, back-office accounting, data entry, and report auditing.

Some of these tasks are performed on-site at client partner companies’ locations, and others are performed at TPI’s Innovation & Technology Centers, currently at three sites.

Addressing challenges, maximizing benefits

Employing people on the autism spectrum is not without challenges. In order to be successful, the hiring company needs internal champions beyond the walls of HR, from leadership around diversity and inclusion to the head of the department the associates will be supporting.

Cultural competency is critical, Resnik says. The employer needs to come from a place of understanding and help associates from TPI find an environment that maximizes their strengths and minimizes sensory triggers, which vary from person to person.

Employees on the autism spectrum can provide a fresh look at company processes, Resnik says. "Everyone is wired differently, and their wiring can produce new solutions."

Resnik said individuals with autism are often the first to arrive, the last to leave, and the hardest-working on their shifts. "They are incredibly loyal employees because they crave the structure and love their work," Resnik says. "But more than that, they bring out kindness in their coworkers and change the culture."

Making a difference

The TPI employment model is working for both individuals and companies. Employers are filling a need for new, diverse talent. But the greatest pride for Dianastasis comes from seeing individuals rise to their full potential and watching companies help them do it.

"It's incredible to watch people who were unemployed or underemployed get a career. A career leads to financial independence, which can mean getting an apartment, inspiration to get a driver's license, and finding their self-pride," he says. "Employing people with disabilities is a way to strengthen your workforce while you live your company's values."

To learn more, attend the session on "Engaging Underrepresented Populations" during IEDC's [Annual Conference](#) in Indianapolis, or contact The Precisionists at info@theprecisionists.com.

Services provided by TPI associates include:

- Accounting services
- Application development
- Application support
- Database optimization
- Device testing
- Regression testing
- Software testing
- Data process QC
- Data analytics
- Data entry
- Data mining
- Data digitalization
- Records management
- Cyber security