

THINK DIFFERENT

INDIVIDUALS WITH
NEUROLOGICAL
CONDITIONS CAN BE
BIG ASSETS FOR
COMPANIES LIKE TD
AND MICROSOFT,
BUT HIRING THEM
REQUIRES A SHIFT
IN THE FIRMS'
MINDSET

**BY JENNIFER
LEWINGTON**

**ILLUSTRATIONS
BY YOSHI
SODEOKA**

In 2018, Andrew Dabbikeh applied for the job of capital markets risk analyst at Toronto-Dominion Bank. Diagnosed on the autism spectrum at the age of five, Dabbikeh holds a bachelor's degree in science, a master's in epidemiology (specializing in biostatistics) and a fistful of analytics-focused certificates. He is also a published composer of electronic music.

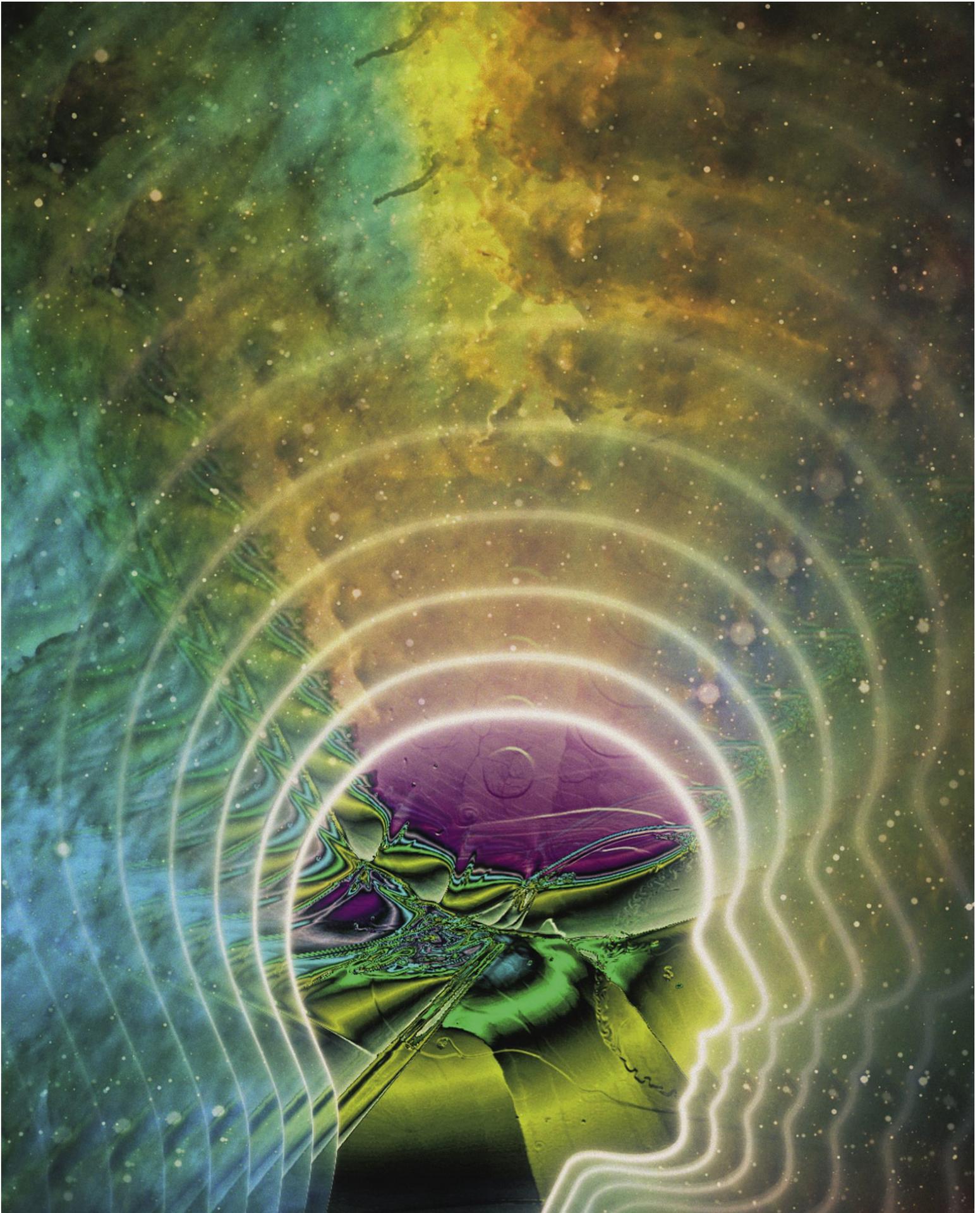
Instead of a typical one-on-one interview at the bank, he and several other candidates who self-identified on the autism spectrum spent two weeks at TD working on simulated projects using Lego robots. The exercise tested their knowledge of analytics, teamwork skills and presentation abilities.

At the end of the two week trial, Dab-

bikeh and his teammates met the bank's hiring managers for the first time. "It was like a *Dragons' Den* pitch," says Dabbikeh, who incorporated music into his team's project, an analytics-rich marketing campaign for a robot that locates victims in a natural disaster.

He was immediately offered a position. Several months ago, he earned a promotion to senior risk analyst, and he recently sat on a bank hiring committee to fill risk analyst vacancies.

"Don't judge a book by its cover," says Dabbikeh, cautioning that some on the autism spectrum may seem aloof at first. "Internally, they are extremely bright and very creative, and they also are extremely emotional," he says. "They just internalize it a lot."



In the global hunt for technology-savvy workers, some companies are turning to a once-ignored source of talent: those diagnosed with autism and other neurological disorders.

This so-called “neurodiverse” cohort—often well-educated, task-focused and prone to out-of-the-box thinking—tends to struggle with the breezy social interactions that get others to, or through, a traditional job interview. In 2017, only 33% of adults with autism spectrum disorder reported they had a job compared to 79% without disabilities, according to a survey conducted by the Public Health Agency of Canada.

Now, assisted by specialty recruiters, business leaders are discovering the bottom-line advantage of neurodiversity hiring—and it’s not just to meet rules on non-discriminatory employment or demands for corporate social responsibility.

“It is a way of accessing talent, potentially high levels of talent, that you would not otherwise have success in accessing,” says Ivey Business School professor Robert Austin, who is the author of multiple case studies on neurodiversity hiring and a recipient of a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council grant through 2024 to study best practices. “There is this large group of people who have the ability to contribute, particularly in areas where companies are having trouble finding expertise,” says Austin, adding that some neurodiverse individuals are gifted in pattern recognition, memory recall and mathematics. “There are not enough people in the world who do business analytics, and a lot of them have great talents that are generally in short supply.”

Unexpectedly, neurodiverse hiring reaps other rewards.

“What we hear consistently from managers...is that it has made them better managers,” says Austin. Workplace accommodations made by managers who communicate clearly and give structured feedback, for example, are as valuable to neurodiverse employees as their peers.

At Toronto-Dominion Bank, which has hired roughly 50 neurodiverse employees in North America since 2016, the business case is undisputed.

“The reason getting this right matters is not because it is the legal thing

**PEOPLE WITH
AUTISM CAN
COMPETE WELL
IN MANY JOBS —
BUT THEY HAVE
TO GET INTO
THE JOBS FIRST**

to do, but because if you want to win as an organization, you would want to do this,” says Paul Clark, executive vice-president of TD Bank Group and chair of the bank’s people with disabilities committee. “We are doing this because we want to win.”

TD’s strategy, he adds, is not only about making accommodations but also to support the overall growth of every employee. “The competition across Canada for incredibly skilled talent is very, very high,” says Clark. “As an organization, we have to tap into that potential.”

Since 2016, TD has worked with Specialisterne Canada, a not-for-profit that promotes neurodiversity hiring. Affiliated with a same-name Danish organization that has championed neurodiversity hiring since 2004, Specialisterne coaches potential job candidates and advises employers on recruitment and orientation practices. Since 2014, the organization has recruited 215 candidates, typically enrolling them in workshops before they connect with employers who, in turn, receive training in the effective interviewing and hiring of the neurodiverse.

TD’s hiring success has spurred an internal discussion about effective recruitment and integration of all employees. For example, vaguely worded job postings may deter potential candidates, especially those on

the autism spectrum who prefer crisp, straightforward language.

“If you read a job posting for risk analyst, there is a ton of jargon and acronyms,” says Keith Isaac, TD vice-president of capital markets risk management. “That is right away a barrier, and a person could say, ‘I don’t have those skills, and I am not applying.’”

With input from Specialisterne, the bank reworked its description of a risk analyst without altering the job. Instead of asking successful applicants to “ensure the execution of your function is in line with documented procedures,” TD begins with a straightforward question: “Does working with database systems to investigate and resolve errors to assure process accuracy and efficiency sound like something you would enjoy?”

As well, TD modified the interview process for neurodiverse candidates to assess their competencies for the job, not superficial chitchat. “When you call in candidates to meet for half an hour or an hour, what are you assessing?” asks Isaac, who has hired more than six neurodiverse candidates since 2017. “You are assessing how firm their handshake is and how well they answer stock questions. Is that really the best way to recruit?”

It turns out effective hiring can also foster employee retention.

Glenn Rampton, a neurodiversity



researcher and an adjunct assistant clinical professor at McMaster University, has tracked the placement record of job applicants coached by Specialisterne Canada.

In a 2020 survey of 80 of Specialisterne's Ontario job candidates, Rampton found 84% were still employed after two years at the same organization or in an equivalent position elsewhere. "People with autism can compete well in many jobs, but they have to get into the jobs first," he says. "The selection procedures, with the best of intentions of human resource people, have tended to screen them out."

Despite successes, neurodiversity hiring remains in its infancy, says Alan Kriss, chief executive of Specialisterne Canada (and a Report on Business Changemaker—see page 17). He says his organization, founded in 2013, has set a "shoot for the stars" goal for Canadian companies to hire 25,000 neurodiverse employees over the next 10 years. However, what Kriss calls a "hairy audacious" target is really meant to prod companies into rethinking conventional recruitment to reach a wider array of highly qualified candidates. "Businesses are very interested, but they don't know how to get started," says Kriss. "Because they don't know how to get started, there is an inertia."

Some, however, are moving ahead.

Last November, global consult-

ing firm Ernst & Young opened its first Neurodiversity Centre of Excellence in Canada, patterned after six introduced in the United States since 2016. The centre recruits those with autism, or sensory or other cognitive differences to work on projects managed by various groups in the organization.

"These individuals are very bright and have advanced degrees," says Anthony Rjeily, EY's national leader for digital transformation and innovation, and national leader of the centre of excellence in Toronto. "They are extremely focused on the task at hand, and much of the work we do in technology and data analytics, blockchain and cyber information technology, requires a level

of focus these individuals have."

Already, he says, those deployed by the centre have spotted technological solutions overlooked by others. "For a firm like EY, it is very important for our people to be innovative to create solutions for clients," says Rjeily. Now, he adds, some clients want EY's advice to set up their own hiring programs.

Companies experienced in hiring neurodiverse candidates offer the same recommendations: Start small, build awareness among all employees about neurological disorders and weave best practices into the corporate culture.

At Microsoft Corp., "we see disability as a strength," says Neil Barnett, director of inclusive hiring and accessibility for the tech giant, which has recruited more than 100 employees under its autism hiring program since 2015.

"This is really a talent play, a [corporate] culture play," he adds. "We are just finding incredibly talented folks who have the skills we need to have, not just for jobs but for careers at Microsoft."

Instead of a conventional interview, Microsoft invites candidates with autism spectrum disorders to its Redmond, Wash., campus for four days of "get-to-know-you" activities. "We do team-building exercises where you get to meet the managers in person before the interview," says Barnett. Most positions have a highly technical component, but a few involve direct contact

with the public. "Some typical skills are attention to detail and the ability to do repetitive tasks, and others are good with numbers," he says. "It's important not to stereotype folks."

Workplace accommodations are typically low-cost—on average about \$500 a person—such as noise-cancelling headsets or seating arrangements for those sensitive to noise and light.

Neurodiversity hiring programs are not just for corporate giants.

Kinaxis Inc., an Ottawa-based supply chain-focused software company, expanded its global workforce by 57% last year to 1,000 employees. "I think 2021 is going to be the hardest talent competition for technology companies we have seen because of this ability for everyone to work remotely," says Megan Paterson, Kinaxis chief human resources officer, citing one impact of the coronavirus. Silicon Valley competitors, she points out, are able to recruit high-quality candidates in Canada without their having relocate to the United States.

Four years ago, with "wonderful" advice from industry rival SAP Canada, a pioneer in neurodiversity hiring, Paterson says Kinaxis introduced its version of Autism at Work. Those on the spectrum now account for 1.5% of Kinaxis's employees. "The impact of people we have brought in through this program has been really compelling," says Paterson. "It is the diversity of thought and perspective [they bring], and it has helped us from an innovation standpoint for sure."

Among those hired recently is software developer Minni Ang, who was not diagnosed with autism until 2017. She holds a PhD in computer applications; her past jobs include university curriculum writer and freelance app developer.

In 2019, coached by Specialisterne Canada, Ang applied for a software developer position at Kinaxis. She and a few other candidates spent two weeks at the company working on projects designed to put their technical abilities on display. Ang was hired immediately and, halfway through a six-month probation period, landed a full-time position. "If you invest in people like me, you can get the same return [as any employee]," she says. "It is a bit of a steeper learning curve at first, but the reward is huge." ■