



October 2011 Newsletter

Company News

-Remember to wash your hands before starting a shift with a child- either with soap and water or hand sanitizer! Let's try to stay healthy!

-If you are interested in being on a list for therapists to call to cover missed hours at different houses contact Heather at sonnenbergconsultants@live.com

-Make sure to continue to e-mail, text, or call Marie on a Daily basis your hours for that day. Include the child's name, the date, the time, if a team meeting, training, or at a daycare.

-Don't forget to "Like" us on facebook!



Happy Birthday!

10/9 Charlene Radcliff

10/22 Heather Kasper

Advanced Lines

-If you are at a house that is covered by insurance the timesheets need to be into

the office by the 18th and the 3rd of each month. If unsure if an insurance house, ask your Senior.

-If you are at a house covered only by the waiver, timesheets need to be into the office by the 3rd of the following month.

-If you are at a post house, timesheets need to be mailed in at the end of the month or dropped off at the office.

*Call Heather at the office (414-751-4222) and let her know what paperwork is needed for a child's house.

Autistic adults create success at startup company

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By **The Associated Press**

HIGHLAND PARK, Ill. -- The software testers at **Aspiritech** are a collection of characters. Katie Levin talks nonstop. Brian Tozzo hates driving. Jamie Specht is bothered by bright lights, vacuum cleaners and the feel of carpeting against her skin. Rider Hallenstein draws cartoons of himself as a DeLorean sports car. Rick Alexander finds it unnerving to sit near other people.



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M. Spencer Green, The Associated Press Aspiritech co-founder Moshe Weitzberg works with employee Katie Levin, reflected in a computer screen, at the nonprofit enterprise that specializes in finding software bugs, as they test a new program in Highland Park, Ill. Aspiritech hires only people with autism disorders.

This is the unusual workforce of a U.S. startup that specializes in finding software bugs by harnessing the talents of young adults with autism.

Traits that make great software testers -- intense focus, comfort with repetition, memory for detail -- also happen to be characteristics of autism. People with **Asperger's syndrome**, a mild form of autism, have normal to high intelligence and often are highly skilled with computers.

Aspiritech, a nonprofit in Highland Park, Ill., nurtures these skills while forgiving the quirks that can make adults with autism unemployable: social awkwardness, poor eye contact, being easily overwhelmed. The company's name plays on the words "Asperger's," "spirit" and "technology." Clients, nine companies in Aspiritech's first two years, have been pleased.

"They exceeded my expectations," said Dan Tedesco of Shelton, Conn.-based HandHold Adaptive, which took a chance on Aspiritech to test an iPhone application. "There is a pride in their product you don't usually see in this type of work."

Aspiritech was founded by Moshe and Brenda Weitzberg after their son, Oran, now 32, was fired from a job bagging

groceries. Oran was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome when he was 14. He now works at Aspiritech. "He went from failing at bagging groceries to being one of the best software testers on our team," said Brenda Weitzberg. The Weitzbergs modeled Aspiritech on a successful Danish company called Specialisterne, or "the Specialists." Specialisterne also employs software testers with autism. Its satisfied clients include Oracle and Microsoft. Other companies in Belgium, Japan and Israel are either hiring or training adults with autism as software testers.

This year, Aspiritech projects \$120,000 in revenue, with 60 percent coming from donations and 40 percent from clients. The Weitzbergs hope to raise the client revenue to 50 percent next year. "There have been a couple of attempts in the U.S. and Aspiritech is the one that's making it," said Scott Standifer of the University of Missouri's Disability Policy and Studies office and the organizer of a national conference on adults with autism and employment. The exact unemployment rate for adults with autism is unknown, but it's thought to be high, Standifer said.

"We don't know how many adults have autism and, because of that, we don't know their rate of unemployment," he said. "We do know from tracking adults just emerging from high school that they are having great difficulty finding jobs." A 2009 U.S. Department of Education survey found the employment rate for young adults with autism was on par with that for deaf-and-blind young adults, and well below the rate of those with blindness alone or learning disabilities or traumatic brain injuries, Standifer said.

Since Asperger's syndrome didn't become a standard diagnosis until the early 1990s, many of Aspiritech's software testers were



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adults when they first learned they were on the autism spectrum. They are pioneers, the first generation of adults with Asperger's.

Katie Levin, 35, was diagnosed in her late 20s with Asperger's. As a child, she'd been labeled as mentally ill. "Asperger's is not a mental illness," she said. "I definitely feel like I identify with the Asperger's community more than I did with the mental illness community." She tests software and runs Aspiritech's Facebook page and Twitter feed.

Rick Alexander, 24, another tester, has a degree in computer science from the Illinois Institute of Technology and completed an internship developing software for the city of Chicago. "I have a lot of social anxiety. I don't like meeting new people," said Alexander, who was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome as a teenager. Like many of the other testers, he lives with his parents. He'd rather be a software developer than a tester, he said. But selling himself in a job interview is "very difficult for me." "When you're a child, the school is very concerned with you, the state is very concerned with you," Alexander said. Organizations help adults with autism, he said, but "you need to approach them and for somebody with Asperger's syndrome, it's very difficult to do the approaching."

Most research dollars have gone toward studying children with autism while adults have been neglected, said Molly Losh, an autism researcher at Northwestern University.

"Our vocational structure really isn't suited to funnel people with autism into the workforce," Losh said. Aspiritech "is a magnificent and innovative venture," she said.

Many businesses hire offshore companies to test software. Mike Mestemaker, director of engineering for Schaumburg, Ill.-based ISI Telemangement Solutions, chose Aspiritech because it offered competitive rates but was based in the United States.

"They dove right in and worked very quickly," Mestemaker said. "They were very detail-oriented people. They really got the job done."

ISI was happy with the work and has hired Aspiritech for a second project, he said.

Aspiritech provides meaningful work (pay is \$12 to \$15 an hour) in a relaxed environment where bosses never yell if you're late and nobody minds if you need to be alone for a while. What's more, the company is building social skills. The software testers, who are in their 20s and 30s, are trained to work together and they take part in organized outings: miniature golf, bowling, eating at a restaurant.

"We want to improve social skills among people who tend to be socially isolated," said Marc Lazar, Aspiritech's autism specialist. For many of them, software testing is not going to be their lifelong career, Lazar said, "but while they're here they're going to improve their job skills and they're going to learn what kind of behavior is expected on the job and they're going to have more to put on their resumes."

By Carla K. Johnson, AP medical writer