

Innovative Program Creates Meaningful Work for Those On Autism Spectrum

BY HEATHER ALBERT

After Alex Polesky graduated from high school, he had trouble finding work — trouble that turned into more than three years of unemployment. The part-time work he eventually found wasn't enough to live on. It wasn't even enough to afford the copay at the dentist.

"I was pretty much broke all the time," said Alex, now 25.

It wasn't that Alex was unqualified or didn't work hard. In fact, he has skills many people don't. But Alex has autism and said he was often looked at as being "too much trouble."

Thanks to a groundbreaking pilot program that started in October, though, Alex and seven others on the autism spectrum are finding meaningful, good-paying work at SRP.

The Precisionists

The Precisionists Inc. (TPI) works with companies nationwide to create job opportunities for people on the autism spectrum, harnessing their special talents. SRP is the first company in Arizona to partner with them.

TPI CEO Ernie Dianastasis approached SRP with the idea in 2017. Stephanie Winn, Manager, Talent Acquisition, had some worries but quickly saw the opportunity.

"There were a lot of risks. We don't have anyone who specializes in this, and we don't have the support services," Winn said. "We wanted to make sure we could support the person with autism as well as the staff around them. When Ernie explained his business structure, though, it answered all of my concerns."

Instead of putting potential candidates through interviews — which many well-qualified people with



Padmaja Potharaju, Senior IT Systems Analyst, works with Alex Polesky, an associate with The Precisionists Inc., on software testing in Enterprise Systems QA. PHOTO BY MICHAEL MCNAMARA

autism struggle with — TPI assesses and trains them over a period of weeks to find out what kind of work suits them best. Those skills are then matched with available jobs or projects. An on-site TPI supervisor acts as the liaison between workers and management, ensuring that everyone's needs are being met.

"We go into a company like SRP and say, 'We can do this with a diverse workforce,'" said Anne Kirchgessner, the on-site supervisor at ISB. "Usually a company has to take a little leap of faith."

On the job

SRP's eight TPI contractors work at ISB supporting Records Management and Enterprise Systems QA. It's systematic, structured work they thrive in and supports SRP's bottom line, as many of these projects would otherwise remain unfinished or have high turnover, Winn said.

Zachary Brown is one of the six associates working with Records Management. Born in Pennsylvania, the devoted Philadelphia Eagles fan moved to Arizona in 2007 with his family so he could attend New Way Academy, a K-12 school for those who have difficulty learning in a traditional school setting.

His job requires him to go through boxes of information and cross-reference it with electronic records to determine if enough detail has been captured. He said this kind of work allows him to do what he's best at.

"I like that it involves attention to detail. I think it's my No. 1 skill," said Zachary, 20. "Accuracy is crucial."

Over in Enterprise Systems QA, Alex is one of two contractors performing software testing on SAP, Maximo and WAM.

"I've grown up around computers, so QA testing is a natural extension of that," Alex said. "I've always been one of those people who is pretty good at picking out details. That translates well to seeing error in coding."

Life-changing work

Some of the TPI associates are working to save up enough money to get their own place. Others are excited to be able to afford small luxuries. It's a life-changing opportunity on many levels.

"This is the first job that I've ever held where I now have the money to indulge in the things I like," Alex added. "I play video games and read, and those things cost money. Now I can start to do some things for myself."

They're also finding a greater sense of community and acceptance.

Jim Bursley, 60, has worked his entire life. His résumé could be anyone's: He worked for BFGoodrich to help fund his bachelor's degree in psychology; went into the Army after college; and then worked in group homes for 20 years, the last two as a case manager for people with serious mental illness.

Behind those successes, however, has been an underlying struggle.

He doesn't multitask well and has trouble reading social cues, but he's good with numbers and is a deep thinker. Throughout life, he said he has felt like an "alien."

Still, his autism remained undiagnosed until he was 52 — and only after a series of serious car accidents.

"When there was traffic, it would become too much," said Jim, an expert-rated chess player. "I have sensory integration difficulties, and I would just shut down."

Now he's around people who understand, and as someone who has been in the workforce for decades, he takes it upon himself to help his colleagues.

"To be in an atmosphere where it's understood and to do a job with meaning and purpose has been unbelievable," he added. "We're all on different spectrums and have different strengths, but we're alike in many ways. I understand where everyone is coming from, so I can help them and they can help me."

Future of the program

The TPI employees are on a one-year contract through October. At the end of that year, SRP has the option to hire some of them as regular employees or sign a new contract. So far, the response has been overwhelmingly positive.

"I believe that everyone they come in contact with comes away a little bit better off for that encounter," Winn said. "They seem to be so happy to be in their jobs and to experience the dignity of work. That rubs off on others at SRP."

Winn said the success of the TPI employees is fostering more interest and hopes that other departments at SRP can find opportunities for them in the future.

"We're all eager for work. We all want to prove that we can be productive citizens," Alex said. "We're worth the time to train and hire."

Zachary agreed: "There should always be opportunities for people with disabilities who can't find jobs."



Zachary Brown says he enjoys building friendships and talking with other employees at ISB: "I can tell they do care. Even SRP cares."

If you're interested in having TPI associates join your department, contact Stephanie.Winn@srpnet.com.