Do Top IT Companies in India Hire Autistic Adults?

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Did you know that you had more brain cells when you were a two-year-old than you will at any other point in your life? But what you probably don't know is that this is also the age when autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in children is detected or diagnosed. But the trouble is that they face an extremely bleak future as they enter the job market in India.

While there are over two dozen organizations helping children and adults with autism and related disabilities develop skills for employment, there are very few Indian IT companies actually recruiting them.

According to Pranesh Nagri, Director at EnAble India, an organization that trains and places persons with disability in companies, eight of the total autistic adults in their last training batch got hired by SAP Labs India. Interestingly, EnAble India is also the local training partner of SAP Labs India which is SAP's second largest global development hub.

Do IT Companies Care About Autism?

Bhuvaneswar Naik, Head of HR, SAP India says, we do not measure the skills of individuals affected by ASD that we hire. However, we have a training and assessment program for them.

Elaborating on the training program, Naik says, a structured process is defined for the Autism at Work project in SAP globally. The shortlisted candidates, in India undergo a three month training cum assessment program which is handled by their local partners, where they are trained on employability skills, advanced computer skills along with SAP specific technical and operational topics.

SAP India is probably the only IT company in India that has hired ten individuals with ASD, and has promised to add an additional ten by the end of this year.

Unlike SAP India, Microsoft India, that is one among the top technology recruiters in India, has launched a pilot program for their headquarters in Redmond, Washington. According to Rohit Thakur, head-HR, Microsoft India, "they are looking to induct autistic individuals into our workforce, and leverage their strengths and capabilities to create greater products and services." But they haven't shared any details as to when they will start hiring autistic adults in India.

Infosys, the Indian IT firm that boasts of being one of the top 50 most respected companies in the world and ranks among the top ten global technology companies, unlike SAP Labs or Microsoft, does not even have a specific hiring policy for people with autism. Neither does companies such as Mindtree or Happiest Minds. TCS, seemed eager to participate, but hasn't responded despite repeated reminders.

Cognizant Technology Solutions, the US-based software company that has a majority of employees working in India, has added 7,200 employees in the first quarter of 2015, and has described it as the recruiter's strongest hiring in the last two-and-a-half years. But when we asked them whether they have a policy on autism or related disorders, CTS chose not to comment on the issue. Harsh Kabra, head- Corporate Marketing and Communications sent a mail saying that they are an equal opportunity employer and does not discriminate on the basis of special physical conditions. "But this isn't a topic we talk about in the media." he responded.

Clearly, only ONE out of the seven IT companies that we reached out to - has definite plans to hire autistic adults in India. For the rest, it's just lip service.

If you look at the limited statistics avaialble on austism related disorders in India, there are about 18 million people with autism and related disorders. But how many of them are employed? Little is known about it. In fact, according to Action for Autism, a national centre for autism in India, no data is available from India to provide an India-specific estimate of the prevalence, and it is unknown whether there are variations in this rate worldwide.

What kind of jobs can adults with autism find?

The US has over 400,000 Americans with autism and related disorders. The nonPareil Institute in Plano, Texas, which is a combination of a training program and software company for young adults on the autism spectrum, or Alliance Data, a Fortune 500 company that is hiring people with intellectual disabilities in North Texas. Research has also indicated time and again that the potential of autistic people seems to fall in common areas—tasks that involve pattern recognition, logical reasoning and picking out irregularities in data or arguments.

Nagri at EnAble India says, a lot of young autistic adults cannot easily subject themselves to change. "But they can certainly do well in jobs that are structured, and require little social interaction," he says.

The Indian Law is Handicapped

But why blame the IT companies alone. Until 1999, the Persons with Disabilities (Equal Opportunities, Protection of Rights and Full Participation) Act (PDA), 1995, did not recognize Autism as a separate form of disability.

Under the PDA Act, disability expands to blindness, low vision, leprosy-cured, hearing impairment, locomotor disability, mental retardation, and mental illness. But it did not describe whether "mental illness" and "mental retardation" equals a particular disability such as autism or related disorders, says Vikram Shroff Legal and Tax Counsel at Nishith Desai Associates.

Since then many bills have been drafted and redrafted, most recent being the Persons with Disabilities Bill, 2014. "It covers, not just six, but 19 physical and mental conditions, including ASD," says Shroff.

Therefore, while the law clearly needs to elaborate upon employment opportunities, government and IT companies really must actively think about how the 18 million people with autism can contribute to the global workforce or they can delay it till the time someone they know, has autism or related disorders.