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## Creating sustainable employment for adults on the autism spectrum

### Background

auticon is a social enterprise that employs adults with Asperger syndrome as IT consultants. auticon currently employs almost 40 members of staff on the autism spectrum in permanent positions across Germany, as well as a number of apprentices in the areas of IT and office administration.

Being a social business rather than a charity, auticon does not depend on subsidies and is able to offer sustainable employment, competitive salaries and extensive professional development (including internationally recognised ISTQB certifications and [access to SAP's in house learning platform](#)). auticon creates a 'win-win-win' situation for

- *the autism community, benefitting from rewarding employment opportunities and an increasingly inclusive labour market*
- *society, benefitting from transitioning unemployed persons into tax payers*
- *external clients, who profit from diversified teams and outstanding quality management services*

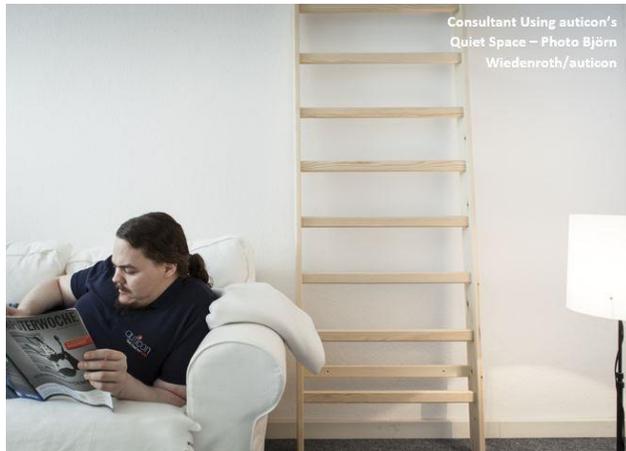
auticon's business model is based on a survey conducted by and of individuals on the autism spectrum. By directly involving the autism community, auticon creates genuinely autism friendly work environments. Dirk Müller-Remus, founder, managing director and father of an adult son on the autism spectrum explains: 'We are confident that the particular strengths and talents of our employees have a huge potential on the mainstream labour market. We are not looking for

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charitable acts. We know that our consultants have the skills to enable them to lead financially independent lives. Our consultants have exceptional analytical abilities and are able to spot errors very quickly. Challenges lie in the area of social communication, being the main reason a mere 5 to 10% of Germans on the autism spectrum are able to secure jobs within the mainstream labour market. We want to change that.'

## The role of job coaches

auticon employs specially trained job coaches. By providing an interface between external clients and consultants and offering advice to both parties, job coaches ensure that projects run smoothly.



Unless explicitly desired otherwise, consultants are mostly stationed on site within external clients' neurotypical teams. At the start of each project placement, job coaches brief future neurotypical colleagues in terms of autism as well as any specific characteristics their new auticon co-worker might have. This allows neurotypical colleagues to ask questions and to reduce potential apprehensions.

Many auticon consultants find it helpful to receive a project outline in writing, including information on what staff they will be working with, where their offices are located and how they can be contacted. As some people with Asperger syndrome have difficulties remembering names or faces, this helps getting familiar with the team and also offers further structure and stability. Job coaches also gather information on respective client's corporate cultures and brief consultants in terms of any unspoken social rules (e.g. addressing colleagues by first or last name, open-door-policies, etc.).

In line with each consultant's individual requests, job coaches facilitate adjustments to project-specific workplaces. Adjustments may include the provision of an office with dimmable lights or blinds, reducing background noises and other potentially disruptive factors to a minimum, or the provision of a designated quiet space. In order to ensure successful collaborations, job coaches facilitate external clients to nominate one continuous contact person within projects, as changing or multiple line managers may in some cases cause confusion and feelings of uncertainty. Being fully integrated into respective client teams, auticon consultants do take part in team meetings

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and discussions. Being briefed in advance in terms of what will be expected of them is particularly helpful to consultants.

Each auticon employee is approached individually in terms of desired working hours. Many on the autism spectrum thrive in structured environments including set working hours; others, however prefer flexible working hours in order to allow for more time to start the working day.

## Case study – Marko Riegel

The business case: During summer 2013 auticon was commissioned by one of Germany's major trade unions to support a large scale membership data migration project. The trade union needed IT experts with exceptional precision and perseverance to migrate vast amounts of member data into a complex new system. Matching their skills and expertise very well, Marko Riegel and one other auticon colleague were eager to take on the job.



With an initially nervous feeling Marko and his colleague set off to what was going to be their workplace for the following 5 months. Thanks to the job coaches' briefing however, Marko and his colleague settled into the trade union's team effortlessly and were able to fully concentrate on doing a fantastic job. Feeling comfortable within the new environment, Marko quickly engrossed himself into a highly

complex system that he knew little about beforehand. Even minor hurdles, such as short notice changes to the trade union's instructions or noisy meetings within their working space were mastered gracefully with the occasional job coaches' support. In the end, Marko and his auticon colleague completed the task well in advance of the expected deadline and took the initiative to contribute to further tasks within their team - creating concrete additional benefits for the trade union.

Marko was thrilled to be able to contribute to the success of the project and felt pleasantly surprised at how well-organised internal project processes were. The trade union's staff on the other hand was impressed not only by Marko's professional expertise and efficiency, but also by the ease with which he and his auticon colleague integrated into their existing team.

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As is the case with the large majority of auticon consultants, Marko Riegel was unemployed and receiving social benefits before finding permanent employment at auticon. Even though he pursued a special interest in web design and programming, he felt overwhelmed by the social demands of typical workplaces. Being long term unemployed and receiving incapacity benefits left him frustrated and prone to mental health issues. As a consequence he was not able to live independently; his two social workers had to accompany him to his interview at auticon.

The beneficial effects of employment on quality of life and particularly mental health have been thoroughly demonstrated within neurotypical as well as ASC populations (e.g. [Walsh & Healy, 2014](#); [LSE, 2008](#)). At auticon, Marko greatly enjoys the opportunity to utilise his talents and abilities and to be productive again. He is financially independent for the first time in his life and now shares a flat with his partner.

By being integrated into neurotypical teams, Marko feels like a full member of society and that he is no longer left behind: 'auticon didn't employ me *despite* my difficulties, but *because* of my strengths'. When you meet Marko now he comes across as a confident and successful IT professional. He is developing his expertise and is now also in charge of managing auticon's online presence.

Rather than trying to 'cure the autism', auticon aims to create environments and opportunities that help people on the spectrum to thrive and utilise their natural abilities. This in turn often has numerous additional benefits in terms of personal development, meaning that autistic consultants become increasingly independent.

There is however one point that still bothers Marko: 'I would like to be *even* more productive. There are not enough employers in Berlin who are willing to give people on the spectrum opportunities to demonstrate their talents. We are beginning to make a change with our project placements but there's still a lot of work to do'. An increasingly accessible labour market would grant more people with Asperger syndrome chances to create an awareness of autism-related skills and talent, and in turn increase employers' openness towards autistic staff throughout the industry.

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