

# Autism at work: How internal and external factors influence employee outcomes and firm performance

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## Abstract

Research and the popular press have provided confusing perspectives concerning the strategic integration of autistic individuals into organizations; some touting the benefits of a neurodiverse workforce and others noting the difficulty that many autistic individuals face in finding and maintaining employment. In this article, we examine these disparate views and build a reconciling framework that incorporates both the internal support that top management teams show for the integration of autistic individuals and the external visibility that can lead to their firm's social approval. In turn, the combination of these internal and external perspectives contributes to explaining an organization's ability to gain competitive advantage from hiring and managing autistic individuals. The proposed framework is augmented by vignettes, providing practitioners with takeaways for how to approach the topic of neurodiversity more successfully.

## Keywords

autism, CSR, firm performance, managerial values, top management team

The narrative around autism at work has provided a confusing array of viewpoints as to whether traditional employment is beneficial for autistic employees and the firm's performance. On the one hand, researchers and the popular press have noted the benefits of a neurodiverse workforce that includes autistic individuals because of the diversity of thought and skills that they contribute to the firm's competitive advantage (Austin and Pisano, 2017; Williams, 2017). On the other, statistics show that autistic individuals face significant hurdles to employment and that autism is frequently labeled as a disabling and stigmatized condition that can make workforce integration difficult and draw resources away from the firm's focus on competitive advantage (Johnson and Joshi, 2016; Wehman et al., 2016). What then are managers and researchers to take away from the combined literature surrounding autism in the workplace? That is, under which circumstances is it beneficial for autistic employees and firm performance to recruit and manage a neurodiverse workforce? In this article, the authors review the emerging literature on the topic of autism at work and contribute to understanding the circumstances that favor the successful integration of these employees through a framework that reconciles internal and external factors of influence. Using examples and vignettes, the authors highlight the combination of internal and external factors supporting (or not) autism at work.

This article comes at a time when there have been increasing calls for researchers to contribute knowledge about autism at work (Vogus and Taylor, 2019). This call has become more important as several factors have combined to give autistic individuals increasing prevalence in the workforce. First, low unemployment rates have led to growing interest by organizations in hiring individuals from underutilized populations such as those on the autism spectrum. Second, lower access to government support has forced many autistic individuals into the workforce for financial reasons (Morath, 2019). Third, the increasing prevalence of autism diagnosis and greater awareness of autism in society have led to more individuals receiving services earlier in life and, consequently, more autistic individuals available to work (Zablotsky et al., 2015).

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is considered a developmental disability defined by a set of diagnosable criteria that includes impaired social communication, restrictive interests, and repetitive behaviors. Some of these impairments may manifest in nonverbal communication (e.g. body language), conversation, and the ability to understand and maintain relationships (American Psychiatric

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Association, 2013). Further, individuals diagnosed with ASD may have an insistence on sameness, inflexibility in routines, and repetitive or stereotyped movements. Autistic individuals are more likely to be responsive to sensory inputs whether it be in a hyper- or hypoactive manner. Finally, there are a number of conditions that are comorbid with autism that may also influence an individual's behavior, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), anxiety, disruptive behavior disorder, depression, bipolarism, and schizophrenia (Chen et al., 2015b).

Given the increasing representation of autistic individuals in the workforce, it is an understatement to suggest that learning as much as possible about autism in the workplace is important. Indeed, myriad stakeholders have an interest in the topic, including autistic individuals, their families, organizations, government entities, and society at large. Yet to date research across literatures has offered a variety of viewpoints concerning autism at work with some being highly optimistic (Austin and Pisano, 2017) and others being more stark (Lorenz et al., 2016). As a result, little headway has been made to strategize around the integration of autistic individuals in the workplace and it remains unclear how organizations can make the most of a neurodiverse workforce.

Against the backdrop of increasing autism prevalence and poor employment outcomes, this article explores the following question: What are the internal and external circumstances that make the recruitment and management of autistic individuals more valuable to organizations? To answer this question, the authors reconceptualize previous literature addressing autism at work with respect to internal and external dimensions. Upper echelons theory is used to examine how, internally, the top management team (TMT) can influence processes that lead organizations to adopt policies that are beneficial for autistic individuals and provide them the chance to succeed in their employment. Externally, the research examines how organizations that hire autistic individuals can enhance their social approval and market performance. The authors argue that these internal and external dimensions intersect and create fit scenarios in a matrix to offer strategic considerations concerning how, and in which way, the recruitment initiatives for those on the spectrum can best contribute to firm performance.

This study is highly relevant to both management research and practitioners. From a research perspective, the manuscript adopts a strategic lens to the analysis of autistic employment and considers jointly how employment outcomes and firm performance intersect. To date, only a few managerial anecdotes have envisioned this proposition. The use of TMT and social approval lenses to conceptualize the internal and external forces that affect autistic employee outcomes and firm performance is both novel and germane to this emerging stream of research. For managers, this research offers insights by examining cases that have worked to the benefit (and detriment) of the organization. Relatedly, the authors offer a matrix of interaction that provides useful guidance for managers and policymakers to cocreate the conditions that favor positive autistic employment outcomes and firm performance.

In the next section, the authors review existing literature on autism across a variety of disciplines with an emphasis on the internal and external motivations for proactively hiring and managing autistic individuals. Next, vignettes are introduced to support and illustrate the authors' framework, showing when internal and external factors favor the successful integration of autistic employees in terms of both autistic employees' outcomes and firm performance. The article concludes with organizational cases, directions for future research, and managerial takeaways.

## To hire or not to hire?

Extant research on autism is noticeably polarized, presenting two diverging perspectives. On the one hand, neurodiversity is framed as a new form of diversity in organizations that can contribute to competitive advantage through competencies that are developed by uniquely skilled individuals (Austin and Pisano, 2017). This perspective typically highlights the mutual benefit of autistic employment outcomes and firm performance. On the other hand, autistic individuals struggle to find and maintain employment and it is recognized that barriers exist in many selection and management practices (e.g. in hiring criteria) (Wehman et al., 2016). As a result, it is common for autistic employees to report highly unsatisfactory employment outcomes (Lorenz et al., 2016), which often translate into suboptimal firm outcomes, such as negative press or social media comments.

The popular press and academic researchers have extolled the virtues of a diverse workforce (Srikanth et al., 2016). Recently, the importance of diversity in the work environment has expanded to include neurodiversity or diversity based on the variety of human cognition rather than more visible forms of diversity (Jaarsma and Welin, 2012). A large component of neurodiversity is the idea that people who have what others would consider a disability (e.g. autism or ADHD) is the result of a naturally occurring variation in human development and should be accommodated rather than treated. This view of autism is in opposition to a deficit-oriented view and instead attempts to focus on the unique strengths that autistic individuals bring to the workplace (Blume, 1998).

In a recent *Harvard Business Review* article, Austin and Pisano (2017) note that many people with certain types of disabilities may have a number of special skills including pattern recognition, memory, and mathematical acumen. Other differences in neurological structures across individuals allow a variety of new perspectives that help organizations create value. Similar sentiments of optimism toward autism at work have been published across a variety of nonacademic outlets (Roberson et al., 2017). For example, the *Huffington Post* published an article that focused on the success that companies such as Microsoft, Walgreens, and SAP have had since their adoption of autism-friendly practices (Williams, 2017). In *Fast Company*, Nerenberg (2017) writes that organizations stand to benefit from having more voices at the table and empowering what the author calls neurodivergent employees. In *Forbes*,

Comaford (2017) underscored that hiring autistic individuals at EY (formerly Ernst & Young) forced their managers to adapt and expand their communication skills and focus on the strengths of each individual employee resulting in greater productivity and a more talented workforce. In short, a variety of outlets convey a sense of optimism about neurodiversity and stress the idea that autistic and other neurodiverse individuals bring unique management opportunities that can lead to competitive advantage.

However, not all research on autism in the workplace paints a picture of competitive advantage and changing management practices. Rather, many point to the difficulties that autistic individuals encounter when attempting to find jobs, maintain employment, and garner equal treatment in the workplace. In the United States, less than 15% of autistic individuals who identified as having a disability and received services for the condition were employed for pay (Roux et al., 2017), a proportion similar to that reported in other developed countries (Scott et al., 2017). In addition, the pathways to employment are often based on subjective assessments biased against some of the traits demonstrated by autistic individuals (e.g. job interviews) (Wehman et al., 2016; Whelpley et al., 2020). Autistic adults who have the required qualifications still report lower levels of employment and occupational status when compared to individuals without a developmental diagnosis (Roux et al., 2013).

Some of the more mundane aspects of employment may also be challenging for autistic individuals. Due to the difficulty associated with socialization and making friends, autistic individuals may feel socially isolated, be explicitly excluded from social events, and could be taken advantage of in the workplace (Hillier et al., 2007). Qualitative research has uncovered a number of issues that autistic individuals have reported experiencing in the workplace (Lorenz et al., 2016; Whelpley et al., 2020). On the less serious side, autistic employees have reported poor communication with managers and generally high levels of stress, which could lead to lower job satisfaction. On the more serious side, autistic employees have reported animosity from their coworkers and, in rare cases, physical attacks. Thus, while some paint a bright and promising picture for autism at work, the day-to-day experiences of autistic employees are significantly different from their peers, with the potential to be more insidious.

Legally, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) makes a legal requirement that employers provide accommodations for disabled individuals in the workplace and that the impetus for these accommodations remains confidential. As a result, coworkers of individuals with accommodations may be left wondering why that individual is receiving more favorable treatment (e.g. different work assignments) and perhaps even feel resentful from “unfair” (unequal) treatment (Colella et al., 2004; Paetzold et al., 2008). Further, individuals who request accommodations may face bullying and maltreatment from coworkers and report generally negative experiences concerning the process for requesting and receiving an accommodation (Kensbock et al., 2017).

In conclusion, the emerging conversation about autism at work in research and the popular press is muddled with both positive and negative employment and firm performance outcomes associated with the implementation of a neurodiverse workforce. In turn, organizations and researchers may be left wondering what to understand about autism at work in general and when/how should organizations proactively recruit autistic individuals. Based on a multidisciplinary review of the literature, the authors extract two factors that are important to consider when analyzing autism at work: (1) the internal practices of the hiring firm that create the context in which autistic employees work and (2) the external environment in which the firm operates. In the next section, the authors explore each of these aspects individually and then develop an argument centered on the strategic fit between the internal integration of autistic individuals in the workplace and the validation of this practice in the firm’s external environment.

### **Building a framework: Internal and external considerations**

To examine the firm’s internal approach to autistic employment, the authors use upper echelons theory. Externally, this article considers how the firm’s environment rewards it via social approval for engaging in socially responsible practices—such as proactively hiring autistic individuals. While each of these approaches provides important insight individually, the strategic management literature suggests that the fit between an organization’s practices and its external environment is significant in explaining financial performance (Scholz, 1987). The strategic fit perspective is especially salient in the case of autism at work, where the fit between the firm’s internal practices and external environment is key to both the employment outcomes of autistic individuals and unlocking competitive advantage at the firm level.

### ***The influence of the TMT***

To explain the internal motivations for proactively managing and hiring autistic individuals, upper echelons theory is particularly relevant (Hambrick, 2007; Hambrick and Mason, 1984). TMTs are made up of individuals who make decisions that shape organizational direction and strategy. Accordingly, it is logical that the values and experiences of the TMT shape their interpretation and support of (or antagonism toward) specific organizational practices (Perrault and Rieflin, 2014). Based on observational evidence, the authors note that proactively including autistic individuals in the workforce is a decision that is largely left to the discretion of the TMT.

As explained above, work outcomes for autistic individuals are typically poor, even when comparing autistic individuals to other employees with developmental disabilities (Chen et al., 2015a; Wehman et al., 2016). As such, there is clearly something about the employment process that seems to make it difficult for autistic individuals to maintain a job. This fact strongly reinforces the contention that

champions within organizations must exist to help overcome the difficulties related to hiring autistic individuals and the challenge of harnessing a competitive advantage from neurodiverse employment.

Examining stories from the popular press, the authors find that high internal support for autistic employment usually follows from members of the TMT who have championed the cause and influenced their organization to adopt such practices. Specifically, the experiences of the TMT members are critical to the firm's decision to hire autistic individuals and to frame their contribution as important. Though the black box of organizational decision-making does not cater to understanding precisely how decisions and conclusions are reached, the example of Hart Schaffner Marx below represents one instance that highlights how organizations are making inroads with their autistic engagement efforts.

Doug Williams, CEO of suit maker Hart Schaffner Marx, had an autistic child. Around his son's teenage years, Williams became increasingly concerned with his son's future, all the while becoming more cognizant that other families with autistic children were facing the same alarming prospects (Elejalde-Ruiz, 2016). In response, Williams redesigned the workplace of Hart Schaffner Marx to facilitate the employment of autistic individuals, including a new hiring process, removing fluorescent lights, and adding an exercise room complete with blue paint to help relax autistic employees. Though designing employment around the needs of autistic individuals clearly has benefits for autistic employees, Williams noted that these employees are a vastly underutilized part of the workforce and that the company could gain strategic value from its autism initiative. However, without Doug Williams and his personal experiences, it is likely that Hart Schaffner Marx would not have made the commitment to, and investments in, hiring autistic individuals. Indeed, the presence of an internal champion appears to be a recurrent pattern in other firms that proactively seek a neurodiverse workforce.

As noted in upper echelons theory, members of TMTs bring their personal experiences, values, and beliefs to bear on their decision-making process (Hambrick, 2007) and to the firm's allocation of resources (Perrault and Rieflin, 2014). Specifically, the personal experiences of employees with autistic friends and family may lead them to use their influence as members of the TMT to make the hiring of autistic individuals a priority in the organization. In turn, as these individuals attempt to change the fabric of organizational life toward a more autism-friendly employment experience, they also find strategic value and competitive advantages that may be ignored by competitors.

### *Responding to external pressures*

It is argued above that the TMT has a critical influence on the inclusion of autistic individuals in organizations and their contribution to competitive advantage. However, not all firms favoring autistic employment do so under the influence of firm leaders. Some do so primarily in response to external pressures such as those from stakeholders and, more broadly, society.

Stakeholder theory proposes that firms do better when they consider and attend to the interests of their constituents, that is, those who are affected and/or can affect the firm's practices (Freeman, 1984). Empirical evidence largely supports this assertion, showing firms' financial performance increasing with specific efforts to address stakeholder issues (e.g. Orlitzky et al., 2003). Firms gain from addressing their stakeholders' issues because it enables a cycle of trust and respect that leads to reciprocity (Harrison et al., 2009). In addition, it affords the firm legitimacy, a critical resource for survival and performance (Meyer and Rowan, 1977). As firms increase their social performance, not only do they solidify their legitimate standing in society (Du and Vieira, 2012), they also benefit from a higher reputation (Fombrun, 2005) and greater social approval (Bundy and Pfarrer, 2015; O'Riordan and Fairbrass, 2008), which have been shown to positively correlate with financial performance (Van Beurden and Gossling, 2008).

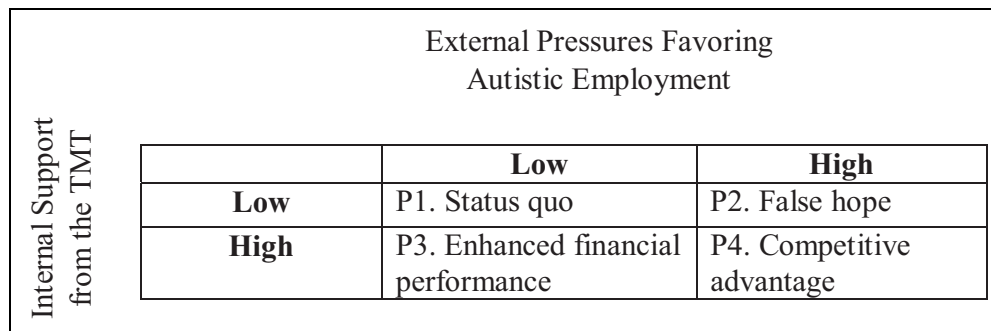
In recent years, society has become more sensitive to the social integration and employment of individuals with disabilities, which has led to some new business opportunities. For example, Rising Tide Car Wash was founded with the intent of providing autistic individuals career opportunities and the chance for financial independence. This mission garnered significant interest from the local community, national organizations, a Ted Talk, and ultimately a growing business that raises social expectations with respect to the possibility of successfully integrating autistic individuals in the workplace for competitive advantage (Inspiring America, 2017).

These initiatives can also be construed as forms of corporate social responsibility (CSR), where firms go beyond their business purpose to address social challenges (Aguinis and Glavas, 2012; Carroll, 1999). This research stream suggests that CSR accords positive, albeit small, and long-term financial returns to the firm (Van Beurden and Gossling, 2008; Wang et al., 2016). Further, CSR can act as insurance for the firm's reputation, by according it goodwill that can be applied against negative events affecting the firm (Godfrey et al., 2009). Likewise, developing a reputation for proactively including autistic individuals in the workforce can act as goodwill for a firm's reputation in its external environment.

Altogether, this suggests that firms may be hiring autistic individuals in response to external pressures and/or to increase external visibility and, in turn, this contributes to their performance by according the firm greater social approval. However, as will be seen below in the propositions, it is possible that this external pressure is met with little engagement from the TMT internally or that it could become an impetus to initiate a larger task force to make autistic employment successful.

### *A strategic fit framework*

In the first section of this article, the authors explained that autistic employment is plagued with hurdles, from the hiring process to the social integration of autistic employees in the organization. These hurdles are influenced—and



**Figure 1.** Autism at work: A strategic framework.

potentially overcome—by two forces: the influence of the TMT (internally) and social pressure (externally). Represented in Figure 1, these two forces come together with varying degrees of synergy: at times working together toward a sustainable competitive advantage and at times coming at odds with each other. Below, propositions are developed regarding the employment outcomes of autistic individuals and firms' competitive advantage in light of the four fit scenarios.

**Status quo: Low internal support–low external pressures.** With few companies reporting on their efforts to hire a neurodiverse workforce, research is left to consider what outcomes currently exist for autistic employees. Except for a few touted corporate initiatives, employment outcomes for autistic individuals have been consistently poor across measurement periods and geographies (Roux et al., 2017). For organizations with low external pressure and low internal support from the TMT, hiring and managing autistic employees is neither a priority nor a consideration beyond complying with legal requirements. As noted, in the United States such legal requirements include the ADA, which contains components of nondiscrimination and workplace accommodation. Given the aforementioned high unemployment among autistic individuals and the low number of investigations since the establishment of the ADA, evidence supports the notion that the status quo is resulting in poor outcomes for autistic individuals (Cichy et al., 2015). This research proposes that the poor outcomes are due to organizations' lack of internal support for these initiatives and the lack of external pressure to change their recruitment and management practices. In turn, when autistic individuals do become employed in these firms, their potentially unique contributions to the firm are not fully realized and thus the firm fails to harness this differentiation for competitive advantage.

For example, Party City was sued by the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) for failing to hire an autistic applicant (EEOC, 2018). In this case, the autistic applicant interviewed for a position with her job coach present. After finding out the applicant would use a job coach as she learned her responsibilities, the hiring manager indicated that they had hired people "like that" before and that it had not gone well. Further, the manager mentioned that the individual who worked at the company and encouraged the autistic individual to apply would "hire

an ant." What seems to be occurring in this case is a company that did not prepare the hiring manager to interview an autistic applicant indicating the internal practices of the firm were inadequate or inappropriate to handle a neurodiverse applicant.

**P1a:** Firms that have low internal support and low external pressure to hire autistic individuals will present poor employment outcomes for autistic individuals.

**P1b:** Firms that have low internal support and low external pressure to hire autistic individuals will present no financial impact from their autistic workforce.

**False hope: Low internal support–high external pressures.** For organizations that operate under high levels of external pressure but have low internal support from the TMT, circumstances are particularly conducive for a lack of understanding that leads to miscommunication, frustration, and conflict between autistic individuals and other employees in the company (Lorenz et al., 2016). In this scenario, individuals are hired because firms perceive external benefits for doing so. That is, they may expect to enhance their brand, reputation, or generate some goodwill for their work environment. However, autistic employees may not get the required support from their managers and fellow employees who fail to grasp the importance of accommodations for successful autistic employment. The authors propose that this is exacerbated by ill-equipped managers and coworkers who are not being given proper training or support when it comes to the management of autistic individuals simply because integrating autistic employees is not an internal priority for the firm. In other words, it is not enough just to get autistic individuals through the door; internal practices are critical to properly manage this unique group of employees and harness their capabilities (Wehman et al., 2016).

For example, the grocery chain Kroger was in the news because an autistic individual quit his job after what he and his mother described as months of bullying where his coworkers allegedly did such things as place sensors in his jacket so as to trigger the alarm upon leaving the building (Kroger Responds to Allegations, 2018). Though Kroger is responding to the allegations and is performing a full

investigation about coworker behavior, it is not the first time a disabled employee has taken issue with this organization. In 2013, a \$450,000 judgment was made against Kroger over the treatment and firing of a special needs worker (Jury Awards Former, 2013). Thus, not only do autistic individuals experience negative employment outcomes, the firm may suffer negative public exposure—as in the example of Kroger—and potentially litigation.

**P2a:** Firms that have low internal support and high external pressure to hire autistic individuals will present the poorest employment outcomes for autistic individuals.

**P2b:** Firms that have low internal support and high external pressure to hire autistic individuals will present negative financial impact from their autistic workforce.

*Enhanced financial performance: High internal support–low external pressures.* When firms are motivated to hire and manage autistic individuals but do not perceive social pressure to do so, firms will benefit from a more diverse workforce but to a lesser extent than when there is external pressure and visibility that hold the firms accountable for their initiative. These organizations typically do not publicly report their efforts regarding autistic employees but rather focus on managing their diverse workforce effectively.

As noted, the benefits of diversity accrue to those companies that can successfully manage through the conflict of having diverse thought processes coexist in the work environment (Srikanth et al., 2016). Logically, this internal commitment to the recruitment and retention of a neurodiverse workforce including autistic individuals would lead to autistic employees being valued in the workplace and being able to perform well in their job responsibilities. These conditions create a good environment for competitive advantage to be realized and for the firm to experience an increase in financial performance.

This said, research suggests that external stakeholders keep firms accountable (Gray, 2002), rendering firms more persistent in their social efforts. Indeed, firms can reap important goodwill and other benefits from presenting themselves in a positive light to external constituents (Godfrey et al., 2009). Consequently, firms that are hiring autistic individuals but not publicizing their initiatives might not receive some of the benefits that can accrue to organizations that engage in socially responsible actions more visibly.

As an example in the context of climate change, McDonald's is engaged in extensive initiatives to reduce emissions, cut waste, recycle, and shift to green packaging by 2025.<sup>1</sup> These efforts have high internal support, being championed by Steve Easterbrook, former President and CEO, and Francesca DeBiase, Chief Supply Chain and Sustainability Officer. Yet, few external constituents are aware of these initiatives. As a result, McDonald's does not benefit from eco-branding, a strategy that could allow

it to appeal to a wider range of consumers or to charge a premium for its products (Orsato, 2006) despite reducing waste by 30% and saving in excess of US\$6 million.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the authors suggest that autistic employment under high internal support will lead to greater employment satisfaction from the autistic individuals, resulting in positive financial impacts, even when these benefits are not publicized.

**P3a:** Firms that have high internal support and low external pressure to hire autistic individuals will present positive employment outcomes for autistic individuals.

**P3b:** Firms that have high internal support and low external pressure to hire autistic individuals will present positive financial impact from their autistic workforce.

*Competitive advantage: High internal support–high external pressures.* A noteworthy characteristic of the firms that claim to garner a competitive advantage from proactively hiring autistic individuals is the match between the TMT's support and the external pressure to succeed because of increased visibility. Microsoft, SAP, and Walgreens represent firms that are transparent and even seek public platforms to discuss their processes for hiring and managing autistic employees while at the same time drawing visibility from external groups (e.g. United Nations and Autism Speaks). This visibility creates pressure for those firms to put more efforts in place to make their initiatives successful (e.g. the creation of a success story narrative), leading to higher job satisfaction from autistic employees. At the same time, the visibility of these efforts results in benefits such as awards and recognition that may help recruit top talent or drive stakeholder support for the firm, such as increased sales and shareholder interest. In fact, for some companies with internal support and external visibility, the proactive hiring and managing of autistic employees can become a distinct competitive advantage and a point of differentiation for three reasons.

First, as discussed across a variety of publication outlets (e.g. Austin and Pisano, 2017; Lewis, 2016; Wehman et al., 2016), learning how to manage autistic employees requires significant effort where organizations learn from their failures. Consequently, firms that have a history of employing autistic individuals may benefit from being further up the learning curve relative to firms that have not. With the unique skills of autistic individuals along with the fairly high level of under- or unemployment, this labor pool is poised to start making inroads toward meaningful employment or, as Thorkil Sonne put it in an interview about his company Specialisterne's reliance on autistic employees, "our sector is crying out for manpower, but Specialisterne has many job seekers knocking on the door" (Donovan, 2008: 1).

Second, as firms find successful strategies for hiring and managing autistic employees and find that autistic individuals are meaningful contributors to the firm, there could be

a reinforcing cycle whereby the firm increases efforts and moves further down the path of autistic employment. Again, as Thorkil Sonne noted, “the key is to find situations that fit employees’ personalities and ambitions” resulting in an advantage to organizations that have worked with autistic employees for longer periods of time (Donovan, 2008: 1).

Third, individuals choose to patronize the firm because of its dedication to helping autistic individuals find meaningful employment, which is well known by external entities in the community. Recall the Rising Tide Car Wash, where business growth has seemingly come not from a vastly superior car washing experience but from the customers’ readiness to support autistic employment in the community. Thus, where internal support for autistic employment is celebrated by a community that also holds the firm accountable for its efforts, there resides a sustainable competitive advantage for the firm.

Building on the Hart Schaffner Marx example, Walgreens is another company that has led the way in hiring autistic and disabled individuals. The journey that Randy Lewis followed, a then vice president at the organization, is recorded in his book: *No Greatness without Goodness: How a Father’s Love Changed a Company and Sparked a Movement* (2016). In the book, Lewis details how his experience as a parent of an autistic son led to a Walgreens’ initiative to hire disabled individuals. Specifically, Lewis was moved by the realization that he, like many parents, was unsure what the future of his autistic child would look like when he was no longer there to care for him. This reflection was the primary motivation to design the company’s distribution center to accommodate people with a variety of disabilities. Again, in line with upper echelons theory, Lewis undertook this initiative with the idea that it would be beneficial not only to autistic individuals and other people with disabilities, but that it would make the organization more competitive in the marketplace.

Similarly, Mary Ellen Smith, a vice president at Microsoft, announced Microsoft would be hiring autistic individuals as part of a company-wide effort to hire more people with disabilities for a World Autism Day event at the United Nations (2015). She opened her speech with an anecdote of her son being diagnosed as autistic and how she may have to “pinch” herself to believe that people are now considering autism as an employment advantage. During her speech, Smith asked that organizations around the world answer her call to action to hire autistic individuals. In this announcement, Smith made it clear that her experiences as the mother of an autistic individual served as the impetus for her work at Microsoft and in society (Smith, 2015). In line with upper echelons theory, values and experiences can act as an instigator for behavior, but for decisions to be made in organizations they need to be interpreted as strategically advantageous (Hambrick, 2007). In turn, Mary Ellen Smith focused on describing some of the unique features of autism that fit well with jobs in technology and ultimately why Microsoft is a more competitive organization for hiring autistic individuals.

Altogether, these vignettes exemplify that internal support for autistic employment and a supportive and rewarding external environment are synergistic. More specifically, they reinforce each other by speeding the firm’s progress on the learning curve, increasing the visibility of their employment initiatives, and ultimately supporting these firms’ sustainable competitive advantage.

**P4a:** Firms that have high internal support and high external pressure to hire autistic individuals will present the most positive employment outcomes for autistic individuals.

**P4b:** Firms that have high internal support and high external pressure to hire autistic individuals will present the most positive financial impact from their autistic workforce.

## Discussion

The purpose of this article is to make sense of the divergent and nascent management research on autism at work to understand better the circumstances that favor autistic employment outcomes and firm performance. In doing so, the authors identify two types of pressure that affect these variables: the internal support that TMTs offer to autistic employment and the external pressures in the firm’s environment. Further, it is suggested that the strategic fit between internal and external conditions is key to understanding employment outcomes and firm performance. The four strategic fit scenarios are presented in a matrix where high internal and external support lead to the best outcomes while high external pressure met with low internal support represents the worst scenario for both autistic employees and the firm.

## Limitations and future research

Synthesizing the emerging stream of research on autism at work, this article identifies that internal and external pressures interact to create circumstances that are more or less conducive to autistic employees’ outcomes and firm performance. While this strategic fit framework represents a preliminary attempt at modeling the conditions under which autism at work can be most successful, the authors would like to acknowledge that the success or failure of organizational initiatives to hire and manage autistic individuals likely cannot be reduced to these two dimensions. Thus, a limitation of our research is that it provides a broad framework that revolves around upper echelons theory and stakeholder theory, when there are other factors that are important. As most initial attempts to model a phenomenon, the current framework needs to be expanded with multilevel and multidisciplinary perspectives. Further, researchers should identify other factors that complement the present framework to understand autistic employment outcomes and firm performance in more complex and nuanced ways perhaps looking to organizational culture, stakeholder orientation, or institutional theory.



Another step is to validate the propositions outlined in the strategic fit framework in a more robust manner. The vignettes presented in this article illustrate the framework, but it would be interesting for future research to examine comparative cases through interviews and ethnography.

Lastly, the present article focused on one type of neurodiversity—autism—yet there are several conditions that may also be considered impairments that permeate today's organizational life and could also fall under some conceptions of neurodiversity as expounded in the present framework (e.g. ADD, ADHD) (Jaarsma and Welin, 2012). Applying the current framework to other diagnosed conditions could bring additional insight to employers and employees as they seek to enhance mutually their workplace experience and outcomes.

### Practitioner implications

For practitioners, this research provides a template to improve outcomes associated with employing an autistic workforce for competitive advantage. As noted, integrating autistic employees is a difficult process and some research has begun to draw out the best practices for successful outcomes, including communication, the integration of autistic individuals with coworkers and managers, and finding accommodations for autistic individuals that give them a better chance for success (Lorenz et al., 2016; Whelpley et al., 2020). The authors also want to distill the best practices that can be gleaned from the vignettes and the lessons that can be learned from organizations that have not approached neurodiversity in the most productive way. In short, the most important lesson is that TMT members must become champions of diversity in their own organizations and start to move down the road toward neurodiversity—with full support and commitment or not at all. We also suggest practitioners look at ongoing research that may point to more specific day-to-day management techniques associated with increased success of neurodiverse workers (e.g. Wehman et al., 2016; Whelpley et al., 2020).

### Societal implications

From a societal perspective, a variety of stakeholders stand to benefit from increased inclusion in the workforce of autistic workers. Autistic individuals would have the ability to earn an income, gain independence, and increase social inclusion and felt efficacy all of which contribute to life satisfaction (Howlin, 2013; Mynatt et al., 2014). Families of those on the spectrum face a variety of direct (e.g. medical costs) and indirect costs (lost productivity), increased participation in the workforce could help to mitigate some of these (Buescher et al., 2014; Horlin et al., 2014). Finally, society and governments face significant costs associated with autism as well. A variety of estimation methods have been published (see Buescher et al., 2014; Horlin et al., 2014) and serve to illustrate that enhancing social structure and reducing the costs of social services could occur through better suited employment structures/reforms for autistic members of society.

## Conclusion

This research is a first attempt to conceptualize strategically autism at work with outcomes relevant to the management literature and practitioners. While to date this topic has been prevalent in nonmanagement literature, and often with a focus on disability, only recently has autism begun to emerge in the management literature, with large organizations providing examples of how neurodiversity can lead to more successful performance and more inclusive work environments. It is the authors' hope that this article will stimulate the interest of researchers to further investigate this important topic going beyond the constructs proposed in this research and provide managers with strategies to more skillfully integrate autistic individuals in the workplace for strategic advantage.


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### Notes

1. <http://corporate.mcdonalds.com/corpmcd/scale-for-good/using-our-scale-for-good.html> (accessed 29 March 2018).
2. <https://www.edf.org/partnerships/mcdonalds> (accessed 29 March 2018).

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