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Autism Initiative in the Industrial Sector: A Case Study

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As employers increasingly view disability as a form of diversity that can enrich the workplace and improve performance, a company in the industrial sector in the Midwest created an innovative initiative for employing an individual with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). A case study methodology was utilized to gain a better understanding of effective employer practices in hiring and integrating employees with ASD. The case study was framed by Yang and Konrad's (2011) model of diversity in the workplace as well the Interactional Model of Cultural Diversity (IMCD; Cox, 1993), with specific focus on the four organizational contexts of the model, namely, organizational culture and acculturation processes, structural integration, informal integration, and institutional bias. Results indicate that the autism initiative had an overall positive impact on the company, with reports of stronger company performance and improved company climate. These results as well as others aligned with tenets of the theoretical framework implemented. Rehabilitation counselors can support employers looking to increase the disability diversity in their company through the theoretically supported insights of this case study. Doing so may help to address the current shortage of skilled workers in the workforce.

More than 30 years following the passage of the sweeping anti-discrimination law known as the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), goals to increase employment of people with disabilities in the U.S. have yet to be fully realized, even as more and more employers view disability as a desirable aspect of diversity in their organizations (Kalargyrou, 2014; Lindsay et al., 2018; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2020). Equal opportunity for employment has proven less accessible for some disability populations than others, including people on the autism spectrum, who have lower employment rates compared to the general population and even other marginalized disability groups (Baldwin et al., 2014; Hayward et al., 2019; Roux et al., 2015). According to the 2017 National Autism Indicators Report, only 14% of adults with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) held a paid job in the community, while 54% had an unpaid job in a facility-based setting and 27% were not employed (Roux et al., 2017). Anti-discrimination laws, as well as growing evidence of this marginalized population's ability to contribute to company performance, have not been sufficient to erase decades-long disparities (Baldwin et al., 2014; Clouse et al., 2020; Coleman & Adams, 2018; Dobusch, 2019; Ohl et al., 2017; Shore et al., 2018).

At a time when about 1 in 54 children are diagnosed with autism (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020), it is becoming more common for employers and C-suite executives to have personal experiences with autism. Such personal experiences spurred many of the early employment initiatives for people with ASD (e.g., Grenawalt et al., 2020; Shein, 2020). For instance, Thorkil Sonne, motivated by his son's autism diagnosis, established a trailblazing company (Specialisterne) that targeted employing people with ASD in software testing positions (Austin & Busquets, 2008; Wareham & Sonne, 2008). This company, along with other early innovators, has had a great influence on current autism employment initiatives. More and more, employers are coming to appreciate neurodiversity for its capacity to enrich company culture and improve the bottom line (Bury et al., 2020; Grinker, 2020; Patton, 2018), and employers have increasingly shifted their focus from legal adherence to proactively enhancing the inclusivity of the workplace specific to working-age people with autism (e.g., Carrero et al., 2019; Flower et al., 2019; Grenawalt et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2020; Rao & Polepeddi, 2019).

Employer-driven initiatives targeting people with autism exist today across the country (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2020).

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Companies, already spending millions to improve their diversity climate, are rapidly increasing their diversity investments to support these efforts (Holmes et al., 2020). However, research on autism employment initiatives and what makes them effective is “in its infancy” (Griffiths et al., 2020, p. 634). To date, this literature has focused primarily on large corporations offering jobs related to computer coding, software testing, and related technology positions. Further, much of the research focuses exclusively on employing individuals with ASD who exhibit some level of exceptionality in areas such as attention to detail, memory, pattern recognition, or visual acuity. Current employment literature too often excludes those with ASD not considered exceptional or “high functioning,” even when research demonstrates that people across the autism spectrum possess functional abilities that can contribute to the labor market (Alvares et al., 2020).

While many researchers have written about the challenges people with ASD and employers face in creating and maintaining good employment opportunities, much more information and research are needed to equip employers with effective policies, practices and processes for hiring and retaining employees with autism (Hurley-Hanson et al., 2020; Johnson et al., 2020). Research is particularly needed regarding autism initiatives implemented in small to medium-sized companies that employ individuals with autism in occupations and roles other than those most commonly examined in the technical and computer industries. This latter point is important given that the autism population is noted for its heterogeneity. Although some people with autism certainly do possess exceptional attention to detail and have an interest in these types of technical jobs, people with autism demonstrate a broad and diverse set of individual strengths and interests to contribute to the labor market (Bury et al., 2019; Patton, 2018).

Hiring initiatives among small to medium sized companies have likely been overlooked in research because they are by nature of a smaller scale, sometimes hiring only one to a handful of people with autism. However, given that small to medium-sized businesses (defined as a business with fewer than 500 employees) make up 99.7% of U.S. employers, initiatives involving these businesses are critical to the broader landscape of employment for people with autism (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2012). The purpose of this study, therefore, was to describe such an initiative created through the collaborations of a medium-sized manufacturer (Prater Industries) and a private human service provider (Autism Workforce) to employ a person with autism in the industrial sector. Rehabilitation counselors have a critical role to play in supporting the increasing number of employers who view disability as an enriching aspect of diversity for their companies. The still limited, but growing trend towards an autism inclusive workplace has never been more important, as individuals with autism represent a relatively untapped and growing population of potential workers (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Patton, 2018; Shein, 2020).

Theoretical Framework

Yang and Konrad (2011) utilized resource-based theory and institutional theory to create a research model asserting, at its most basic level, that the presence of effective diversity management is key to the success of diverse organizations. Studies have shown that employers can significantly impact organizational diversity through a demonstrated commitment to the same (Hayes et al., 2020; Ng & Sears, 2020) and through effective diversity management practices (Besler & Sezerel, 2012). A meta-analysis considering 25 years of diversity climate research suggested that strong company commitment to a pro-diversity climate and support for the general well-being of employees produces greater job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and performance (Holmes et al., 2020). Research has also suggested that all employees in a company, not just those from a diverse or marginalized population, benefit from a well-implemented diversity management initiative (Ashikali & Groeneveld, 2015). Specific to our target population, research demonstrates that effective disability management practices positively influence employment of people with autism (Black et al., 2019; Brooke et al., 2018; Markel & Elia, 2016; Rashid et al., 2017). Yang and Konrad (2011) further argued that setting social and professional norms of inclusivity, as well as recognizing the value of diversity within the workplace, serve as antecedents to effective diversity management in the workplace.

Effective implementation of these practices is believed to facilitate a more diverse organization. According to the model, implementing better diversity management practices leads to greater perceived legitimacy from external entities (e.g., government, advocacy groups, and customers), greater perceptions of fairness internally, and a sustained competitive advantage over the competition. Yang and Konrad suggested multiple areas for future research stemming from their model. These include process-oriented questions that are best addressed by considering practice in context of the organization, including questions about the formation of a strong diversity climate and considerations of how institutional forces are transformed into organizational action. As recent as 2020, Holmes et al. have argued that several gaps still exist in our knowledge of how companies successfully implement diversity strategies within their organizations.

We also drew from elements of the Interactional Model of Cultural Diversity (IMCD; Cox, 1993), with particular focus on the four organizational contexts of the model: (a) organizational culture and acculturation processes; (b) structural integration, or the level of heterogeneity in the formal structure of an organization; (c) informal integration, or the level of access to social networks and mentoring activities; and (d) institutional bias, including the policies, procedures, and patterns of work that may favor the majority population. According to the IMCD, these organizational factors, along with individual and group level factors, serve to predict overall success in creating a diverse company culture. An interesting tenet of IMCD that has received less attention in the literature states that the strength of diversity in an organization impacts outcomes of that diversity, such

that greater diversity produces greater outcomes (Holmes et al., 2020). While this concept of strength has most commonly been defined by quantity of diverse members in an organization, it may also apply to the uniqueness of the inclusion effort. People with autism are among the most excluded from the current labor market. Therefore, organizations that create an inclusive culture for this population may reap greater benefits than those who act to include less marginalized populations. In line with this theoretical foundation and considering the current gaps in the literature, we conducted this descriptive case study design with an emphasis on employer's and organization's important role in supporting employees and enhancing their work experiences, while also considering the perceived outcomes resulting from these efforts.

Methods

Researchers used a descriptive qualitative case study design that allowed for exploration of events or phenomena in a real-world context and from multiple sources, with the purpose of looking into the unique experience of the people's lives and interactions with their work environment in relation to their disability inclusion efforts (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Yin, 2018). The use of a case study design to investigate perceptions of the *how* and *why* for a business-led autism employment initiative is fitting given the limited literature capturing the continuum of people on the autism spectrum and the range of industries where they could be employed (Griffiths et al., 2020). The research team involved in data collection and analysis was comprised of six faculty and doctoral students across three universities in the United States. Team members discussed potential biases prior to engaging in data collection and again before completing the analysis to reduce the potential for biases to influence the results.

Organizations

Prater is a medium-sized company in the machinery industry in the Midwest. First established in 1925 as Prater Pulverizer Company, the company has grown drastically to become an internationally recognized manufacturer of production equipment. Prater's mission statement from the employee handbook states, "Prater brings people together to provide process solutions that feed, nurture, and house the world. We develop and provide innovative, tailored material size reduction separation, and process solutions." The Bolingbrook facility where the site visit and interviews took place includes just over 60 employees. There are sister locations in Sterling, Illinois and Boyne City, Michigan that have not yet involved Autism Workforce and therefore they were not the focus of this study.

Autism Workforce is a private human services provider with the following mission statement: "We are driven to help companies enjoy the benefits of employing this ready, willing, and able workforce. Using well-thought-out and proven strategies, we bridge the gap between good intentions and the need to take care of business." Autism Workforce specializes in supporting companies in their efforts to

identify, hire, and train employees with autism. They seek to accomplish this goal through a three-pronged effort that includes on-site staff training, workplace and job preparation, and employee onboarding. This last step is designed to allow for eventual fading of services as the employee with autism is integrated into the company. Autism Workforce has worked with multiple companies from various sectors of the labor market, including Hart-Schaffner Marx, a textiles company that produces men's suits, and Oliver Wyman, a worldwide consulting firm. Autism Workforce worked with Prater in collaboration with IMEC, which is a business consulting firm focused on improving company processes and outcomes.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a combination of on-site observation, individual interviews, focus groups, company policies and other written materials, and the company website. Once identified as a company of interest, the research team worked closely with leadership from Autism Workforce and Prater staff to organize a site visit and to conduct interviews. Prior to the site visit, the research team requested access to any written information, forms, or documents relevant to their disability efforts. Key personnel were also asked to provide a few written answers regarding the implementation of practices and policies related to their disability initiative. These were reviewed by the research team prior to the site visit in order to allow for better understanding of company activities. Researchers met on the day of the site visit in order to discuss potential biases and strategize how these biases could be minimized.

The site visit included individual interviews, focus groups, and a tour of the facility. The interviews and focus groups ranged from 20 to 90 minutes in length using a semi-structured interview format. All interviews and focus groups were completed with two to three members of the research team present, providing a check and balance to the possibility of interviewer bias while also enriching the data collection process with multiple perspectives. We conducted in-depth individual interviews with seven employees representing upper-level management, direct supervisors, and co-workers of the employee with ASD. The two focus groups included one group who received disability awareness training before the company rolled out its disability initiative and the second comprised individuals who did not receive the training. The tour of the facility was conducted on the same date as the interviews and focus groups. Personnel leading the tour were asked to emphasize any disability-related environmental adjustments, modifications, or supports, to inform and give context to the data collection and analysis. The interviews, as well as site tour, led to the collection of more written policies and procedures that were added to the materials for analysis. Digital audio recordings of all interviews and focus groups were created for transcription and analysis. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Approval from the university's Institutional Review Board was also obtained to conduct this study with human subjects.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was performed using the NVivo 12 software. All data sources were reviewed and coded by one to two coders, depending on the complexity and subjectivity of the information, who independently identified categories for each information source. Where two coders were used, the coding team then arrived at a consensus in determining the main themes. In the event of a disagreement between two coders, a third coder was included to discuss the item until an agreement was reached. Once created, the coding and narrative of the case study were brought to the larger research team for a community-based approach to refining and improving the accuracy of the case study. A draft of the results was sent to leadership at Prater, Autism Workforce, and to the employee with autism and her family to check for accuracy and to provide any suggested revisions prior the submission process.

Results

This case study focuses on the unique partnership between Prater Industries and the private human services agency, Autism Workforce. The impetus for this partnership was described by Prater leadership as stemming from a confluence of unmet needs in the company, a strong value for contributing to and engaging with the community, and an organization that served to bridge the needs of Prater and Autism Workforce. Prater's unmet need stemmed from efforts to digitize nearly 70 years' worth of documents that were needed internally to meet customer needs for obtaining spare parts and keeping their equipment operational. The detail and precision required for the job combined with its repetitiousness made it a task that employees demonstrated or expressed difficulty performing or sustaining. Prater's CEO stated that the unmet need led to initial conversations about recruiting from a previously untapped applicant pool. This new idea for recruitment appealed to senior leadership as a way to meet company needs while also pursuing greater community engagement, a strongly held company value. However, it was not until a representative from IMEC, a consulting firm aimed at creating increased sustainability and competitiveness, pointed to a solution in Autism Workforce that the idea gained traction. In noting the opportunity to improve the company while supporting the local community, Prater CEO stated that he was committed from the start to understanding how to do it, "...so that we get both benefits." Prater and Autism Workforce connected in 2018. After recognizing a fit, Prater and Autism Workforce worked collaboratively to prepare the environment at Prater and educate employees to facilitate the successful hiring of an individual with autism who initially required support beyond what was typically provided to employees. The recruitment process was then accomplished, and an employee was hired in January of 2019.

Preparation and Services Provided Previous to Hire

Prater's CEO noted that a key aspect of the hire was the public announcement made by the company's general manager to all employees. Beyond informing Prater employees about the initiative, the general manager made clear it was something senior management were highly involved in and supportive of. Autism Workforce completed a thorough analysis of the tasks to be performed by the employee with ASD. This task analysis provided content to develop visual supports, video modeling, peer-mediated instruction, and social narratives that could be used to inform both the hiring and training processes. A senior manager spoke of the improved process and information sharing resulting from this exercise by stating that it made, "...us much better as an organization." The manager went on to say that it helped them change from a pattern of giving people tasks without sufficient thought of how it affected the employee and the company to, "do some more thinking, do a better job documenting our processes so that it's systematic."

The onboarding process, a known area of concern among many applicants with ASD, included a pre-interview group tour to provide rich information about the job to selected candidates in a more relaxed setting. From this group, a select number of candidates were invited to be interviewed by human resources, with the clearly stated option of being accompanied by a job coach. Conducting this pre-interview tour was noted by some as having the observed effect of reducing applicant anxieties in the actual interview. Finally, Autism Workforce provided an autism training (referred to as Autism 101) to the employees at Prater most likely to interact with the new employee with autism in the workplace prior to the candidate beginning with the company. This training covered a number of topics relating to autism with the goal of helping Prater employees feel more comfortable working with an employee with autism and to provide them tools for successful interactions and collaboration.

Preparation and Services Provided Post Hire

Once selected, the new hire with ASD received enhanced job training. This training utilized the task analysis conducted prior to the hire and allowed for supports in the form of visual supports and video modeling. A job coach was provided from Autism Workforce during the onboarding process to support the new employee in learning work tasks and managing the social environment. Tools were also provided to the new employee with ASD to facilitate her success. These tools included a job task binder that contained the visual and written steps for each job responsibility connected to document scanning and a clearly laid out daily to-do list for her to use as a reference until the work became more ingrained. The Autism Workforce team also worked with Prater to set up the new employee's workspace to meet her needs, with input from the new employee.

The goal of both Prater and Autism Workforce is for the job coach from Autism Workforce to fade these services over time. That said, Prater and Autism Workforce maintained a close collaboration and recognized that new co-

workers, changes or additions to job tasks, change of location, and other adjustments may require a job coach, who had faded services, to re-engage the employee in the work setting to facilitate stability and success through the change. These pre-hire preparations and post-hire practices were all made through close collaboration between Prater and Autism Workforce with the goal of successful diversity management. The effect of these efforts and other critical contextual information is reported below.

Analysis of Context, Consequences, and Future of the Initiative

In addition to describing the content of the initiative, the research team sought to identify practices implemented as part of the collaboration between Prater and Autism Workforce and to provide a holistic assessment of the results of the initiative beyond those that might be captured in immediate financial terms alone. These results emerged from data analysis across all individual and group interviews, as well as on-site observation and written policies (e.g., employee handbook, Autism Workforce guide). This information was collected over several months of 2019, and results are broken down into the following categories: (a) Impact of the Disability Initiative, (b) Company Culture and Characteristics Related to the Initiative, and (c) Future Directions. We proceed with a review of each category and their domains.

Impact of the Disability Initiative

Impact of the disability initiative included the following three domains: (a) training provided by Autism Workforce, (b) company performance, and (c) company climate. We discuss each one below.

Training Provided by Autism Workforce. One of the first impacts of the disability initiative interviewees noted was the autism training offered by Autism Workforce to Prater staff. There was a unanimously positive sentiment among those who we interviewed who went through the training. Some spoke of how the training prepared them for workplace interactions, as in the following statement:

We always talk to [the employee with autism], too, and that's where I was told, when we went to the training, that it's perfectly normal that she wouldn't look at you. "Don't expect when you talk to her that she would look at you." So, then I knew that, and it was perfectly fine with me.

Another employee at Prater stated they got the following from the training,

You say good morning to her, and she might not say good morning back. But keep doing it every day and, you know what, it's not bothering her. So just keep going about like it's normal. You don't need to push her, but you also don't need to [say], "Oh, she's cold. I'm going to stand off." Just keep doing what you are doing.

The training was described as “eye-opening” by multiple Prater employees. The CEO and others noted the included exercises “really helped accelerate who we are and who we

want to be.” These exercises included modeling meant to illustrate the importance of specific and clear instructions. Multiple employees who did not receive the training noted that they would appreciate the opportunity to receive it, even if their interaction with the employee with autism were minimal due to working in different areas or in unrelated roles.

Company Performance. The domain of company performance was captured in various ways and from various angles. More than one senior manager referred to hiring from untapped recruiting pools as creating “a competitive advantage.” One person built on this idea by stating, “The opportunity lies in creating the future-oriented environment and then getting, from a business perspective, a competitive edge such that the company can attract and retain talent. That makes all the difference.” In a related comment, the same senior manager stated, “I think in the end, it [hiring from diverse talent pools] shows in the bottom line.” Another senior manager went a step further in saying,

I don't think there's an organization in the world that could not benefit for someone with autism. You just have to be open, and you have to be willing to walk through the processes that they have and understand where it might be a fit. Autism's not going to be a fit in everything the company does, but let's understand where it might be a fit. And I think if you don't do that, you're really limiting the workforce that you could have.

In discussing productivity of the company, there was an emphasis on the quality work being performed by the employee with autism, as well as on how hiring this employee had helped them improve their processes generally. Speaking to the quality of the work, one senior manager stated, “For my department personally, it's made our job faster—and our job is very time sensitive.” This manager went on to say, “It's made us more efficient and it's helping to streamline my department a lot.” Another senior manager stated, “Everyone's really happy because the scanning she's doing is making the job easier for people to find things. They're really glad that she's here doing that.” Prater staff noted the consistency and competence of the employee with autism, with one senior manager stating, “There is an extremely high dedication. There is predictability.” Another said, “I'm happy to have her. She's doing a great job.” Regarding more general processes, a senior manager stated the following about the improved organization and information sharing they implemented in preparation for hiring their employee with autism:

I think it really helped us continue to get better and better at what we do, and we can use it for anybody who's coming in because once you have a good process, documenting processes, it can't get any better, right? So, that's where I think it really has helped us in the journey.

In a similar vein, another senior manager stated,

In the past we have not been very structured. It [the disability initiative] is making us better because we're starting to create documents. We're starting to document processes. And it was like, “Yeah, we should have done

that in the first place, right?" And we're having to standardize things we never standardized. And I view at this as a really good opportunity for us to just kind of nail down these processes.

Finally, another manager talked about how this idea has spread to others, stating, "It has made me think, Okay, those people who report to me, what can I do to help them? Or what's something they'd like to see? Or how do they like things?"

Company Climate. The final domain under impact of the disability initiative was its effect on company climate. One senior manager commented on how hiring the employee with autism has improved the company climate and even the perceptions of their vendors. Speaking of when he first announced the initiative to his employees, he stated,

And I found out a few people had relatives who had autism. They came back and talked to me, and outside vendors have reached out to me saying, "This is great." I think it's just made us feel better because it's not all about the bottom line, right? You don't get this great warm feeling because, "Oh, I hit the number." But you do get that when you help people, but you're also getting value out of it.

In another comment, the same senior manager said,

I think it's a more caring environment. I know it is because our leadership team is starting to feel it, and they understand. I guess when you set the example and you say that you're going to be open to this kind of a thing, then they start to feel it, too.

A member of senior management spoke to the expanded understanding employees have when working alongside more diverse individuals stating, "It helps people understand that we can all add value."

Another employee talked about the impression the autism initiative made on him even before being hired with Prater. The employee recounted, that while he was waiting in the reception area for an interview "I picked up the little pamphlet that was there and started reading about their autism initiative. And I thought, 'Wow, that's great.' I just thought, 'Wow, that's pretty awesome.'" Another employee reported having positive feelings about the company before hiring the person with ASD, but said from the moment the initiative was being put in place that, "we're not just talking the talk, we're walking the walk, which strengthened how I felt about the company." This same person later expressed gratitude that the employee with ASD chose to come to Prater "and that we had this opportunity to make us better yet." Multiple people stated that the autism initiative had created a more positive perception of the company. Perhaps a senior manager summarized the thoughts and feelings of the Prater employees best simply by stating, "I just feel better about what we do."

Company Culture and Characteristics Relevant to the Initiative

The second category that emerged from the research was related to company culture and characteristics that

seemed to facilitate a successful disability initiative. This category included repeated mentions of the company emphases on being employee-centered and on valuing both diversity and community engagement. The Prater Employee Handbook also highlighted what they call *key behaviors* emphasized in the company. These written values complement and expound on those identified through the interviews. The listed values are as follows: (a) integrity, (b) delivering results, (c) customer focus, (d) resilience, (e) innovation, (f) teamwork and collaboration, (g) continuous improvement, and (h) adapting to change. Prater's willingness to innovate is demonstrated through the disability initiative, which seeks new and better ways to accomplish their work.

Employee-Centered. In speaking about employee practices at Prater, one senior manager stated,

We are definitely very, very flexible around here. People who have problems, people who need to get home for whatever reason; that's what I love about this place. You're not stuck from 9:00 to 5:00. They're kind of like a family. They really are. I know that sounds cliché, but really, I wouldn't have worked here for 11 years if I didn't think the way I think. And even though Prater's gotten bigger, it's still the same. You know, they've become a little more, you know, corporate, but the values are the same, they absolutely are the same, very flexible.

Another senior manager spoke of the company general manager by saying,

He just wants to help everybody, and I think he really looks at them like they're family. You can't say that about a lot of businesses, really. They're very flexible about your needs; very sympathetic and very sincere, definitely. So, it's a good place to work.

The Prater Employee Handbook, although employee-centered, did not fully demonstrate the flexibility in working hours noted by employees in the interviews. The handbook did state that employee working hours would vary by department and by supervisor while also providing information and guidance about employee leave. That said, a senior manager captured what many interviewees said in the statement that "We probably go way beyond what the policies are. So, it's not always written." The manager continued, "We take into account the individual and what they're doing and their—the struggles they're going through." Another effort noted by interviewees and in the employee handbook that attests to Prater's employee-centered focus is their tuition reimbursement policy. A senior manager spoke of some of their employees and the difficulty they would have funding their own education. He stated, "They're working here and we're paying for their education because we know that it furthers their development. It helps give them a career." The Prater Employee Handbook echoes this sentiment in stating, "At Prater, we are interested in your personal and professional development." The handbook also describes an Employment Assistance Program to support employees through personal needs and difficulties, including disability, that highlights their employee-centered culture.

Valuing Diversity. The Prater Employee Handbook includes disability in its equal employment opportunity description along with multiple other marginalized groups (e.g., race, religion, homelessness, arrest record) and encourages the commitment of all employees to abide by the policy. This valuing of diversity was captured by several people in the company. When asked how the company maintained a priority on diversity in day-to-day operations, one senior manager responded that it's about demonstrating a "willingness to learn and accepting that everybody is different."

Some referred to the level of employee diversity as proof that it is a value of the company. One senior manager stated, "If you walk through the facility, we are very diverse," and then added, "We have a very high percentage of female colleagues for a manufacturing environment and in the senior leadership team, which I think is great." Others remarked about efforts to communicate across language barriers and to create an inclusive environment. Another senior manager spoke about giving marginalized people and groups opportunities by saying,

Giving people a chance makes everybody stronger. You get a different viewpoint. The more diverse we can be, the better off we will all be. I think you just go in with an open mind understanding it might be a challenge, but it's worth doing.

Valuing Community Engagement. Multiple people at Prater spoke to the importance of making a positive impact on the local community. The employee handbook states, "Prater strives to be a good corporate citizen and to help enrich the communities that surround both your residence and work." A senior manager stated,

We always have ongoing conversations among the senior leadership team...looking at ways we can engage more with the community and provide meaningful employment. That's a core belief we have, that we can basically be a better participant in the community and provide a safe, enjoyable, fun workplace, where people can really grow.

Another senior manager stated, "I've seen some big steps towards trying to get Prater more involved in the community. So, I think it's positive. I wasn't expecting it, and it was a pleasant surprise."

One example of how Prater encourages community engagement is their policy allowing and encouraging employees to take up to eight hours of paid time off per calendar year to volunteer in the community. Another employee talked of feeling empowered to pitch the idea to sponsor a local human service provider in their efforts to serve the community. The company was still considering these suggestions at the time of the researcher site visit and interviews.

Although not something that was widely discussed, two members of the senior leadership team who championed the relationship with Autism Workforce spoke of how their own childhood backgrounds influenced their motivation to be a positive influence on individuals in the community. One spoke of his own humble financial background as a motivation for this priority in the company. Another spoke of

growing up in a different country where he experienced a greater sense of corporate responsibility for hiring marginalized people. This background, he said, made it natural to see the potential in recruiting untapped pools of applicants at Prater. It is noteworthy that senior-level management all described direct experiences working with individuals with disabilities that positively shaped their attitudes toward the current disability initiative, and the broader mentality of seeking the best employee for the company, regardless of disability status.

Lessons Learned and Future Directions

Multiple people discussed what they would do next to improve upon their current disability initiative, and some also talked about things they might have done differently with the advantage of hindsight. Regarding lessons learned, multiple senior managers suggested that integration could have been improved by having Autism Workforce staff do more to introduce the employee with autism to the people she would be working with and to create some positive interactions that they could build from. That said, the same senior manager acknowledged that this level of integration may or may not have been too overwhelming of an experience for their new hire early on. Another employee talked about the need to include emergency response plan considerations in the onboarding process to ensure the safety of neurodiverse workers and to instruct other employees on additional roles they might play.

One challenge noted by multiple employees was focused on the working environment created for the employee with ASD. Initially, the employee was situated in a room somewhat removed from most other employees in the company out of consideration for the employee's sensitivity to loud noises and stimulation in this manufacturing environment. However, the lack of integration resulting from this physical location became a concern after getting feedback from the employee with ASD. By the time of submission, a new workspace had already been created for the employee in a more central location with the goal of providing greater integration, while still accommodating the environmental needs of the employee. The trial and error of creating an optimal work environment speaks to the importance of a thoughtful, balanced approach in managing the work environments of neurodiverse employees. Prater demonstrated that it is possible to help employees with ASD feel part of the social fabric of the company, to the extent desired, without overtaxing the employee with too much social or other environmental stimuli. In anticipation of the change, one employee stated, "With the office move, we are going to do in the next few weeks she is going to be right next to the team. I think that makes a big difference, hopefully in a very positive way."

Perhaps the most conclusive indicator of the success of this employment initiative is demonstrated in the several statements from Prater management that they would like to keep and build on what has been established. One senior manager captured this well in referring to their current employee with autism, "She's great. She's here every day. She's a hard worker. She does her job, and she does it very well."

And so, why wouldn't I do it again?" Another employee stated that she appreciated the company initiative stating, "hopefully were going to have others in the future."

All data sources pointed to a strong value for providing necessary accommodations and offering flexibility to employees with and without disabilities, which were flagged for supporting employees in navigating difficult life circumstances and facilitating personal growth. These subthemes relating to accommodations and flexibility were noted by senior leadership and employees and backed by company policy, as captured in written documentation collected by the research team.

Discussion

In this research, we have described a case study of an autism employment initiative in a medium-sized company in the machinery industry in the Midwest. People with ASD face numerous obstacles during the employment process including navigating the job application process, handling social interactions effectively, managing sensory sensitivities, and facing employers' and coworkers' attitudes and stigma toward ASD (Baldwin et al., 2014; Dreaver et al., 2019; Flower et al., 2019; Scott et al., 2017). The results of this case study address some of the questions posed through the research model of Yang and Konrad (2011), while also supporting theoretical propositions made by Cox (1993). The case study also serves as an example for companies looking to expand their recruitment and hiring pools to include qualified applicants with ASD. The following discussion highlights key findings in relation to previously described theoretical tenets. Rehabilitation counselors equipped with this knowledge will be better positioned to support companies in their own disability inclusion efforts.

The research model and theoretical framework used in this study emphasize the important role played by company leadership in a successful disability initiative (Cox, 1993; Yang & Konrad, 2011). The findings strongly support the role of company leadership in disability inclusion efforts, with many employees suggesting that their support for the initiative came, at least in part, from recognizing how committed company leadership was to the initiative. As with other qualitative studies, direct support and participation from leadership served to legitimize efforts and serves as a model for other employees (Trullen et al., 2016). In the IMCD framework, this can be recognized as an important aspect of organizational socialization that contributes to the broader organizational culture and acculturation process (Cox, 1993). For Yang and Konrad (2011), the valuing of diversity and diversity-promoting social norms and values serve as key antecedents of diversity management practices. In addition to a value for diversity, Cox (1993) emphasized the importance of demonstrating a tolerance for ambiguity. Prater leadership and personnel conveyed this tolerance in establishing the disability initiative, particularly early in the process. Efforts of both Prater and Autism Workforce supported a shared belief that the disability initiative would benefit the company and its employees.

Participants and written documents also described Prater as a company that was employee-centered and placed value in both company diversity and community engagement. These values (formalized or not) were repeatedly noted in the interviews as facilitating the success of the autism employment initiative. These antecedents are closely aligned with those described by Yang and Konrad (2011), as well as by Cox (1993). One aspect of the initiative most discussed in company interviews was the Autism 101 trainings that took place prior to the targeted hire. Cox (1993) emphasized the importance of structural and information integration in the IMCD framework. The training provided by Autism Workforce to Prater employees was found to be especially helpful in integrating the new employee and supporting a more inclusive work environment. As demonstrated in this study, training can be useful in facilitating interpersonal and collaborative team atmosphere, which can promote comfort and support for all employees (Markel & Elia, 2016). Although diversity training is far from a new concept, disability is often overlooked in such trainings (Byrd, 2009; Procknow & Rocco, 2016; Ross-Gordon & Brooks, 2004). We also know that, even when disability is included in trainings, the focus is almost exclusively on physical disability (Kormanik & Nwaoma, 2014; McGuire, 2014; Procknow & Rocco, 2016; Qin et al., 2014). Other studies support the findings of this research in demonstrating that autism awareness training is beneficial in increasing employers' and coworkers' attitudes and allaying concerns related to hiring and supporting people with ASD, with some researchers arguing it is essential to creating an inclusive work environment (Chen et al., 2015; López & Keenan, 2014; Markel & Elia, 2016). Research conducted in Australia and Sweden also support the importance of autism education and awareness training, suggesting that this specific training is among the most effective strategies for promoting positive relationships among coworkers with and without ASD (Dreaver et al., 2019).

The general willingness to accommodate employee needs, whether disability-related or not, seems to have facilitated the success of the disability initiative. Cox (1993) emphasized this quality in what he termed, "The Low-Prescription Culture" (p. 169). In a low-prescription culture, a wide range of work styles and behaviors are perceived as appropriate, allowing greater latitude in how one approaches work (Cox, 1993). Accommodations granted only to employees with disabilities have the potential to create feelings of resentment. In contrast, Prater employees often described the accommodations being offered to the employee with ASD in relation to flexibility that they themselves have been afforded by the company. The resulting outcome seems to be a feeling of camaraderie rather than contention. In a paper outlining organizational initiatives and human resources practices to promote career development of employees with disabilities, accommodations for all employees, those with and without disabilities, was highlighted as an effective practice (Kulkarni, 2016). Kulkarni (2016) found that the willingness to accommodate any employee who needed it promoted feelings of equality across employees in regard to performance and overall de-

velopment (Kulkarni, 2016). Beyond flexibility, Autism Workforce worked closely with Prater to ensure recruitment, hiring, and training materials were accessible for all potential and current employees. This structural integration ensured that a broader set of employees could more independently navigate the employment and onboarding processes.

Both frameworks used in this study assume a well-executed diversity initiative will produce greater well-being among all employees, greater internal perceptions of fairness, increased external perceptions of legitimacy, and sustained competitive advantage. Indeed, several employees and senior leaders reported having more positive views of the company following the initiative and a greater sense of fulfillment in what they do. Workers, especially senior management, also described the autism initiative as creating a competitive advantage for the company. Interestingly, some of the comments suggest that diversity has the potential to not only increase the *perception* of fairness in the company, but also the actual level of fairness being practiced. As noted previously, one supervisor spoke to this point in stating that learning to meet the needs of the employee with autism helped the supervisor to appreciate ways to better meet the individual needs of all employees. Finally, although not a major emphasis among company employees, one senior leader noted more positive perceptions of vendors who took the time to reach out and express their support for the initiative.

Although not conclusive, the combination of sources in this case study support the theoretical tenet described in the IMCD that the strength of diversity affects the outcomes of diversity. Prater was viewed as a racially and gender diverse company prior to the autism initiative, and yet, interviewees were quick to point to value added with the introduction of this initiative. Although the greater outcomes could be associated with the simple addition of diverse workers, it appears more likely that these desirable outcomes resulted more from the uniqueness of the inclusion and integration effort than increasing the number of diverse employees by a quantity of one. This latter point is an area especially deserving of greater research attention as companies seek to appreciate the benefits of employing a diverse workforce.

Replicability

The success of having employees with ASD and of replicating this initiative at other companies was mostly met with positive feedback, but with a few caveats. A member of the leadership team stated,

We're still gaining from it, and we're still going to push through. I absolutely think it's replicable. I think part of it is, having someone that can walk through your organization and try to understand where it might be a good fit, so understanding the fit might be important. And then you absolutely have to have someone like a job coach help them work through this process.

This case study focused exclusively on a collaboration between Autism Workforce and a medium-sized company

in the machinery industry in the Midwest with the purpose of assisting individuals with disabilities in obtaining and maintaining employment. It would be interesting to assess the generalizability of this collaborative project by testing whether it would be as successful in different job sectors or in companies of different sizes. It would also be interesting to explore the perspectives of individuals with disabilities within a company pursuing an initiative to hire and retain individuals with ASD and assess whether their opinions are aligned with other employees'. This study addresses previous calls to circulate information about successful initiatives related to employees with disabilities (Colella, 2001; Kulkarni & Lengnick-Hall, 2014; Stone & Colella, 1996) and provides a shift from predominant human resource development research focusing on reprehensible work conditions and experiences (Hidegh & Csillag, 2013; Procknow & Rocco, 2016). Future qualitative studies should document experiences from the perspectives of those with disabilities and autism. Further exploration will not only increase the generalization of findings, but will also provide additional perspectives so leadership teams can better recruit, hire, integrate, and retain individuals with disabilities in the future. In addition, employers, human resource professionals, and vocational rehabilitation professionals should look to collaborate on identifying opportunities for individuals with ASD to meet staffing needs and be successful, and to ensure that workplaces provide a welcoming environment for all employees.

Conclusion

The findings in this case study demonstrate that the collaboration between Prater and Autism Workforce has had a positive impact on the company's overall work environment, with the employee with ASD contributing significantly to the company's productivity. This case study adds further support to existing research indicating that direct supervisors often give employees with ASD high marks on their job evaluations (Hagner & Cooney, 2005; Hillier et al., 2007; Parr & Hunter, 2014; Unger, 2002) and that universal and standard accommodations in the workplace can assist companies in creating successful autism initiatives. The results from the present study also suggest that company-driven disability initiatives may provide opportunities for individuals with ASD to be successful in an industry that is rarely considered (i.e. machinery manufacturing). Penetration into new sectors is especially important given the many individuals with ASD who could bring unique skillsets to the labor market (Dreaver et al., 2019; Markel & Elia, 2016). This case study helped illuminate the benefits of employers hiring individuals with ASD in the industrial sector. Additionally, findings provide knowledge and understanding that can increase confidence among other employers who may be worried that they are not prepared to face possible workplace difficulties, accommodations, and needs they associate with disability (Rashid et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2018; Seitz & Smith, 2016). This case study, combined with existing literature, suggests the trend of employers, both small and large, taking a lead in autism employment

initiatives will continue; and in doing so they will create a stronger, better performing labor market.

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