

Recruiting Neurodivergent Candidates using the Specialisterne Approach

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the utilization of Specialisterne, a neurodiversity-focused recruitment and consultancy organization, in the process of hiring neurodivergent candidates within a Statistical programming group. Neurodivergent individuals possess unique cognitive strengths, including exceptional attention to detail, pattern recognition, and logical reasoning, which are highly applicable to roles requiring complex data analysis and programming skills. The aim of this paper is to document the experiences and outcomes of incorporating neurodivergent candidates into the Statistical programming group and to evaluate the effectiveness of the Specialisterne approach. The paper discusses the identification of suitable candidates through specific assessment methodologies tailored to the needs and abilities of neurodivergent individuals. Furthermore, it examines the adaptation of the recruitment process to support successful integration and ongoing development of neurodivergent employees within the team. The paper also considers the benefits and challenges observed throughout the implementation of this hiring approach, from both the perspective of the organization and the neurodivergent employees themselves. By sharing the experiences gained and lessons learned from utilizing Specialisterne in the recruitment and integration of neurodivergent individuals, this paper aims to provide insights and practical guidance for other organizations seeking to enhance diversity and inclusivity within their statistical programming groups.

INTRODUCTION

At Parexel, we embarked on a path towards recruiting neurodivergent candidates for several reasons. Firstly, we recognized that certain countries and job roles were better suited to setting candidates and our business up for success. Additionally, we believed in the importance of developing a competency-based screening and assessment model that allowed us to identify the unique strengths and abilities of neurodivergent candidates. To ensure a more inclusive hiring process, we re-designed our job descriptions to be more welcoming and accommodating for neurodivergent individuals.

Reinventing the interview process to be more inclusive was also a priority for us. We strived to create a conducive environment that supported the needs of all employees, including providing a streamlined hiring and onboarding support framework such as an 8-week 'internship' program. To foster long-term success, we were committed to developing tailored career journeys, curricula, and training programs that catered to the specific needs and abilities of each neurodivergent employee. Moreover, we ensured that managers and a strong support network were in place to provide guidance and assistance throughout the entire employment journey. Cultural shaping and effective communication were key aspects of our approach, and we implemented a communication strategy to promote a safe and open disclosure environment where neurodivergent employees could thrive. Finally, we believed in celebrating success stories and openly sharing them to inspire and support the ongoing journey towards greater neurodiversity within our organization.

Parexel chose to partner with Specialisterne to achieve the goal of hiring neurodivergent staff. Through this partnership, we benefited from leveraging the Specialisterne-led approach to recruitment, which included competency-based candidate assessment and selection. Additionally, both candidates and managers received neurodiversity training and education, a structured onboarding process was implemented, and a workplace support program (coaching) was established. This collaboration presented an opportunity for Parexel to tap into the talent of neurodivergent individuals to meet its existing labor needs in a neuroinclusive way. Through the development, refinement, and implementation of inclusive hiring and management strategies, policies, and processes, we enhanced our understanding and practices in this area. The success of this initiative was measured by fulfilling the project objectives, which

involved identifying, assessing, and selecting neurodivergent candidates for pre-identified and existing job opportunities at Parexel and to create an environment that enabled their success in these roles.

In the following sections I will describe the steps taken in partnership with Specialisterne that led Parexel to be able to successfully hire neurodivergent candidates.

PHASE I: ROLE ANALYSIS

Parexel and Specialisterne collaborated to identify business teams and hiring managers who would have specific roles associated with the project. Specialisterne then worked closely with these hiring managers and representatives from Human Resources to accomplish the following:

1. Identify Suitable Job Roles

Specialisterne and Parexel identified the job roles that were relevant to the project. This ensured that the recruitment efforts were targeted and aligned with the project's specific needs.

2. Conduct In-depth Role Analysis

Specialisterne conducted a comprehensive analysis of the identified roles in collaboration with the hiring manager. This analysis included examining the tasks expected to be performed in the role, the competencies required to perform those tasks, and how the job tasks and competencies are connected. We spent a lot of time considering what was a required skill and what was a skill that could be learnt on the job. We also assessed the job environment including the types of communication and interaction that are required to perform successfully along with typical stressors that we experience in the role. This analysis provided valuable insights and information that supported Specialisterne's recruitment, assessment, and selection efforts. By thoroughly understanding the roles, Specialisterne was able to effectively match neurodivergent candidates with the requirements of the positions.

The job analysis is instrumental not only in ensuring that job tasks are up to date, but that tasks and responsibilities are described clearly, free of jargon or buzzwords and qualifications or requirements are not unnecessarily over-estimated.

3. Develop an Inclusive Job Posting

In collaboration with Parexel, Specialisterne created a job posting that promoted inclusivity and diversity. This job posting was designed to attract neurodivergent candidates and showcased the project's commitment to fostering an inclusive work environment. Specialisterne leveraged its extensive network of neurodivergent candidates ensuring a wide reach for recruitment efforts.

Through this collaborative process, Specialisterne and Parexel were able to identify the right roles, analyze their requirements, and attract a diverse pool of neurodivergent talent to contribute to the project's success.

PROJECT PHASE II: RECRUITMENT, ASSESSMENT AND SELECTION

In Phase II, the recruitment, assessment, and selection process were carried out identifying suitable candidates. Specialisterne, utilizing its candidate pool and various networks such as the autism/neurodivergent community, social services agencies, local post-secondary institutions, social media channels, and public awareness, initiated the sourcing and recruitment activities. All interested applicants were screened for eligibility through Specialisterne's online application, which was managed entirely by Specialisterne.

For the assessment of candidates, Specialisterne adopted a competency-based approach, recognizing that neurodivergent individuals can be well-suited for a job but may not align with traditional tools used to predict job success. Their multifaceted assessment process, grounded in "universal design", aimed to generate competency-based Candidate Profiles. This collaborative process ensured that Parexel was able to make informed and inclusive decisions that went beyond relying solely on resumes and interviews, which can hinder the identification of job fit for neurodivergent candidates.

The assessment process was designed to identify candidates who would be highly likely to be suitable for the identified roles. It is logical, fair, objective, and inclusive, focusing on job requirements and confirmed competencies obtained through job analysis. To achieve this, candidates were given the opportunity to demonstrate their competencies through various means, rather than just self-report interviews. Specialisterne invited a shortlist of applicants to participate in the assessment process, which is designed and conducted in collaboration with subject matter experts on the hiring team. Parexel contributed to the assessment process by providing work samples, case studies, and a short set of SAS related questions.

Upon completion of the assessment, Specialisterne developed Candidate Profiles for the recommended candidates. These profiles included detailed information about individual skills, proficiencies, strengths, and other related data. The recommended candidates and their Candidate Profiles were then presented to Parexel for consideration and final selection.

PROJECT PHASE III: CANDIDATE AND MANAGEMENT TRAINING

Team & Management Training

Education and awareness activities were incorporated throughout the entire Neurodiversity Hiring Initiative, spanning from project kick off to employee onboarding. The team at Parexel had access to educational webinars that introduced important concepts, language, and the value of fostering workplace inclusion. These were designed to enhance organizational confidence and capacity for inclusive hiring, as well as generate interest within the business lines and departments that we were hiring into.

I also attended the Neurodiversity in the Workplace eLearning series tailored for Managers. This was a self-paced series that helped me gain knowledge and insights to understand and actively participate in every phase of the hiring process. This opportunity for applied learning enabled me to implement inclusive hiring and management practices in real-time, covering aspects from job analysis to selection and onboarding.

Candidate/Employee Training

Specialisterne provided candidates/employees with training to support their smooth transition to new roles within Parexel. The training included general workplace guidance, navigating social aspects of the workplace, disclosure, workplace accommodations, and more.

PROJECT PHASE IV: ONBOARDING AND WORKPLACE SUPPORT

This phase focused on creating a supportive and inclusive work environment for all employees, with a specific emphasis on accommodating the needs of autistic or neurodivergent individuals. Understanding that these employees may have different ways of learning, communicating, and processing information, and may face barriers in the workplace is key. To ensure a positive onboarding experience, a holistic approach that supported both the employee and the employer was utilized.

During the structured onboarding process, the Workplace Support Manager from Specialisterne worked closely with the incoming employee and Parexel. This ensured that the employee became familiar with the working environment and the formal onboarding processes of Parexel. Additionally, Specialisterne provided support to the Line manager and other team members from Parexel during this period.

Upon the selection of candidates, Specialisterne began providing Workplace Support for the employees and the line manager. The duration of this support was for three months, and the level of support given was tailored to meet the specific needs of both the employee and the line manager. The Specialisterne Workplace Support Manager assisted both the employee and the line manager through an individualized, flexible, and collaborative process. These support sessions focused on navigating the social and behavioral aspects of the workplace and helping the employee excel in their role. The sessions were conducted on a one-on-one basis.

CONCLUSION

This process encouraged us to assess our hiring practices for the Statistical Programming group overall. We identified and included critical skills in our job descriptions while condensing tasks to the most frequently performed ones. This led to discussions about updating and making our job postings more inclusive. Being involved in the development of an inclusive job posting was a valuable learning experience that highlighted the impact of recruitment steps on neurodivergent candidates and allowed us to review our existing process.

During Phase II, we took a leap of faith in leaving the selection process to the experts at Specialisterne. As a hiring manager with over 15 years of experience, it was initially unsettling to relinquish tasks such as screening resumes, asking probing questions, and assessing candidate fit for our team. However, it was important to acknowledge that the typical interview process is not inherently inclusive. Specialisterne used behavioral and skills-based assessments, along with questions we provided, to evaluate candidates. This demonstrated that flexibility in candidate assessment methods is essential.

The updates we received from Specialisterne in Phase II were reassuring and showed remarkable results. Out of 188 applicants, 166 met the eligibility criteria. Specialisterne narrowed down the pool to the

top 25 candidates, who participated in a multi-day assessment workshop. Based on the workshop outcomes, we were provided with 13 profiles to select from for the available positions. The blinded nature of the profiles eliminated any unintentional bias in the selection process.

Phase IV marked the exciting part of welcoming our new employees. Coordinating logistics and ensuring readiness for Day One proceeded typically. We organized a well-attended training session on creating inclusive workspaces for neurodivergent employees, conducted by Specialisterne, and supported by our DE&I group. The engagement from the programming team was highly encouraging for a successful onboarding experience. The workplace support provided to the hiring manager was a great benefit to be able to have a safe space to ask questions to build managerial skills to consider the needs of the neurodivergent employee.

Onboarding went well, and both internal and external support ensured a smooth transition for the new employees. Accommodations were prepared, although none were requested. The assigned mentors responded positively and were excited to be part of this initiative. Our new team members seamlessly integrated into the group and demonstrated enthusiasm to contribute and showcase their skills.

A year after hiring, we remain impressed with the quality of work and the willingness of the new team members to engage with the group. In some instances, they have shown behaviors and competencies expected at advanced levels. Overall, this experience was incredibly positive, and any minor challenges encountered were typical of the recruitment, onboarding, and development process.

In conclusion, the support and guidance provided by Specialisterne throughout every step of the process made it not only seamless, but also an enjoyable experience. The teamwork and transparency fostered during each phase helped us to identify and hire the best candidates for the roles. Specialisterne provided detailed information that eased any concerns or caution we had about reshaping the interview process to be inclusive for neurodivergent candidates.

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