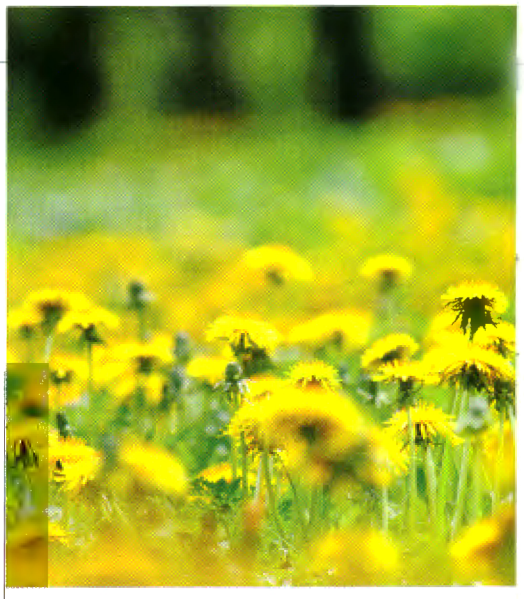
The *Specialisterne* Story



by Mark Katz, PhD

A QUESTION FOR VISIONARIES in the ADHD community: Are there lessons to be learned from the Specialisterne experience that can also help provide new opportunities for adults with ADHD and other learning challenges?

A consultancy company based in Copenhagen, Denmark, Specialisterne provides a range of services to high-tech firms throughout the country. What's unique about the company is that high-functioning adults on the autism spectrum comprise its workforce. Many of the employees also have ADHD or ADD as an additional diagnosis. Their unique characteristics, considered liabilities in other situations, provide them with an advantage at Specialisterne.

The company was started in 2003 by Thorkil Sonne, a former technical director in the telecommunications industry, and the father of Lars, a child with high-functioning autism. Thorkil was often amazed by Lars' unique strengths, quirky perhaps to others, but very much in line with the strengths that he looked for when hiring employees. For example, Lars excelled at tasks requiring acute attention to visual detail. He also could hyperfocus on activities in which others would eventually lose interest. Thorkil knew these skills were important to workers who perform such important functions as data entry or testing software programs for hard-to-find errors at high-tech companies. He also knew that companies fortunate enough to have employees skilled in these areas had an advantage over their competitors.

So, in 2003 Sonne started a company that hires high-functioning adults on the autism spectrum, who then consult with different high-tech firms throughout Denmark. The company's name, Specialisterne, is Danish for "the specialists." Since beginning operations, Sonne has received requests from others around the world interested in replicating Specialisterne. They, too, believe it makes good economic sense.

Specialisterne evaluates the skill sets of potential employees through a three- to five-month assessment process. Potential employees are taken through a variety of exercises and work-related situations to determine how motivation, skill sets, and workability match up with specific work-related tasks. In Denmark, the program is generally available to people with autism who need to learn more about themselves and their opportunities in the labor market. This means that employment in Specialisterne is not a goal in itself. As such, only one in six of those assessed for employment as consultants are hired by Specialisterne Denmark. In other countries, a more targeted selection of trainees means that the percentage of trainees ending up in a job is higher.

Specialisterne also operates a three-year education program in Denmark for young adults. Participants have included not only young adults on the autism spectrum, but also some impacted by other challenges as well, including ADD or ADHD, obsessive compulsive disorder, and Tourette syndrome. In addition to teaching traditional school subjects, the program focuses on teaching social and behavioral skills and works closely with Specialisterne's business partners to provide students with internships and other hands-on work experiences.

The Dandelion Model

Specialisterne's business principles are based on the Dandelion Model, which promotes an environment where workers on the autism spectrum feel wanted, and where their contributions are recognized and valued. The dandelion seed is the company's logo and a metaphor symbolizing its vision. To some, the dandelion is viewed as an annoying weed. But those who look deeper see that when cultivated, the dandelion, known for its healing and medicinal properties, is among the most useful plants in nature.

Sonne's dream is to create one million jobs for people with autism and similar challenges worldwide. To help translate that dream into reality he started the Specialist People Foundation, a nonprofit organization that partners with corporations and businesses around the world interested in replicating Specialisterne. In June 2012, the foundation opened its headquarters in Wilmington, Delaware. Operations will commence in April 2013. It formed its first corporate partnership with CAI, a Delaware-based mid-size information technology firm that sees the value of accessing the skill sets of people with high functioning autism. Other U.S. corporate partnerships are in the works.

Sonne's vision has gained worldwide attention and recognition. At the World Economic Forum in Tianjin, China, in September 2012, he was one of twenty-six individuals who received a global entrepreneurship award. Sonne was also invited to the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, where he had the opportunity to engage with potential global partners.

Readers interested in learning more about the Specialist People Foundation are encouraged to visit specialistpeople.com to find recent news stories, audio broadcasts, and television coverage. The website also gives information about Specialisterne's plans for expansion around the United States.

Are there lessons to be learned from the Specialisterne experience that can benefit adults impacted by ADHD and other learning challenges? We want to hear your thoughts. Sonne believes that if his son had been diagnosed with a condition other than autism—with ADHD, for example—he would have started a similar company in another business area. As he puts it, "It's all a matter of mindset—like seeing the dandelion as an herb rather than a weed." A

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