In many ways, Gloria Mendoza is a typical 24-year-old. She has a college degree in computer science and music, she enjoys going to baseball games and movie nights, and she wants to find a fulfilling career. But after finishing school in 2014, Mendoza spent more than a year applying for jobs, with little success.

She lived with her parents and worked in temporary positions while sending out résumés, but she rarely heard back. When she did, Mendoza said, her autism made it difficult to make it past an interview. Like many people with autism, she might answer questions slowly, share a blunt observation that other applicants would temper, or miss social cues. Traditional job-interview questions such as asking for strengths and weaknesses left her feeling overwhelmed.

“"I just had to think of something to say," Mendoza said, pausing, "that wouldn’t screw up my chances of getting the job." Often she couldn’t think

By Abigail Abrams  September 24
of anything.

But after her father read about software giant SAP’s Autism at Work program, she applied, received lessons in social skills and went through five weeks of technical training at the company’s headquarters near her home in Newtown Square, Pa. There, hiring managers could assess Mendoza’s skills in a relaxed setting and find a good place for her within the company.

Mendoza has been interning for 10 months, and said she’s been told she is on track for a full-time job offer. But many others on the autism spectrum are not so lucky. Each year in the United States, 50,000 people with autism enter adulthood, according to the advocacy organization Autism Speaks, and the vast majority will not find jobs.

Autistic adults can be excellent employees, but advocates say they need to be given a chance to show their talents. The past few years have seen public and private agencies begin working to help autistic adults succeed in the workplace, but their unemployment rate remains high and, despite an increasing awareness, the relatively few organizations dedicated to assisting autistic adults are struggling to keep up.

A complex disorder

Autism is a complex neurological disorder that encompasses a range of conditions, which vary in severity. People with autism often face
challenges with communication and social interaction, problems controlling emotions, and obsessive or repetitive behaviors and interests. Some individuals on the autism spectrum do not speak, while others have a mix of impairments and advanced skills, such as a good memory or a focus on detail. About half of autistic individuals are “high functioning,” which means they have average or above-average intelligence.

There is no standard count of how many American adults have autism, but its prevalence has skyrocketed in recent years. In 2001, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimated that 1 in 150 American children had autism; by 2014, the rate had increased to 1 in 68. Most of the money dedicated to autism research in the United States goes toward finding a cure or the causes of the disorder, and to early-intervention methods; very few studies focus on adults.

Federal law obligates educators to help children with disabilities develop a plan for entering adulthood, but a 2014 report from the A.J. Drexel Autism Institute found that just 58 percent of high school students with autism had such a plan by the required age. Once individuals with autism leave the education system, they lose access to support services, specialized counselors and the routine of a structured environment.

“When people hit 21, they call it a cliff. The services really do fall off, particularly for individuals who have gone to college, because I think the
expectation is that, ‘Well you’ve made it through college, getting a job should be the easy part,’ ” said Marcia Scheiner, who runs a program based in New York to help adults with Asperger’s syndrome — a mild kind of autism — find competitive jobs. She started the program after seeing the challenges her own son faced because of Asperger’s.

The 2014 report found that two-thirds of young people with autism did not move on to employment or other education in the first two years after leaving high school, and for more than a third, this continued into their 20s. Young adults with autism were also more likely to be unemployed than their peers with other disabilities. Employment data is scarce for autistic individuals, but researchers have estimated that between 70 and 90 percent of autistic people are unemployed or underemployed nationally.

“Until we as a society, from government through everything, see that a nation that has a 70 percent unemployment rate for people with autism and people with disabilities is a problem, it ain’t going to work. We have to make a critical commitment that this is wrong,” said Scott Badesch, president of the Autism Society, a national advocacy group.

‘Driven to know everything’

Keith Coburn, who has a fairly high-functioning form of autism, said he previously avoided telling employers about his diagnosis because he
thought it would hurt his job prospects, even when applying to
government agencies where certain jobs are reserved for applicants with
disabilities. But after spending years searching for employment and
working seasonal jobs, he found a position as a clerk at the Federal
Communications Commission in Washington with help from the Arc, a
national advocacy organization for people with intellectual and
developmental disabilities.

Coburn never needed to discuss his diagnosis with his employer because
the Arc, which also helped Mendoza at SAP, communicated directly with
and trained employees at the FCC.

Lisa Scanlan, Coburn’s boss in the FCC’s audio division, says that he is
one of her most dependable employees and that his computer skills have
helped him excel at processing license changes for radio stations. For his
part, Coburn, who is 26 and lives in Bowie, Md., said having his first
permanent job has allowed him to develop camaraderie with his
colleagues.

“It provides a level of stability I didn’t have before when it came to
employment,” he added. “I’ve had a bit of a stronger base to work out of
for other aspects of my personal life, like knowing I had a steady income
to make monthly payments on a new car.”
While vocational programs can help autistic individuals adapt their behavior at work, autism advocate John Elder Robison says employers also need to understand basic accommodations that can help them succeed.

Robison owns a business that repairs luxury cars in Springfield, Mass. He didn’t know he had autism until he was an adult, but Robison said he started the company years ago because his social awkwardness and his sometimes singular focus on minute details of cars prevented him from feeling comfortable in other jobs.

“I am driven to know everything there is about the cars that I work on here. That’s an example of how if I was a child, they would say I have a fixation with cars. And they would describe it in words that would imply it was a disability,” said Robison, who also teaches a class on understanding neurological differences at the College of William and Mary and advises the federal government on autism research. “But what was an obsession for a child is a powerful positive recommendation for the same person as an adult.”

‘A business imperative’

Autism costs the United States as much as $367 billion per year in productivity and medical expenses — about the same as diabetes — according to a study published last year. If the rise in prevalence
continues at its current rate, autism-related costs could top $1 trillion annually by 2025.

One way to cut down on these costs is to move more adults with autism into the workforce. SAP, which started its program in 2013, hopes to have 1 percent of its global workforce — about 650 people — come from the autism spectrum by 2020. PricewaterhouseCoopers has developed networks and programs that support hundreds of employees with disabilities or who are caregivers for those with disabilities.

“Why are we doing this? There is some social consciousness; it’s a great thing to do. But I’ve got to tell you it’s much more of a business imperative,” said Brad Hopton, a tax partner at PwC who has been a leader in the company’s disabilities efforts. “For us it’s all about the talent — bringing in talent and harnessing the talent that we have to take that to our clients. We need that diversity of thought, that diversity of approach, to take to our clients to answer their questions.”

Many of these corporate programs now reach out to colleges. Joel Carver, a rising senior at the College of William and Mary, said he didn’t really understand his Asperger’s syndrome until his last year of high school. When he gave a presentation to his psychology class about his diagnosis “just about in tears” and received a positive reaction, he decided to
become an autism advocate to help others understand the struggles people on the spectrum face daily.

Carver said he often has trouble reading people’s emotions and interpreting their body language during a conversation. Carver, who has shoulder-length hair and likes to tell jokes, said most people are surprised to discover he has Asperger’s. “I’ve learned to process social situations logically rather than intuitively,” he said.

While Carver is open about his diagnosis on campus, he said the decision to disclose his Asperger’s to prospective employers was more difficult.

“I think understanding and the willingness to work around an individual’s strengths and weaknesses — those two things will lead to the greatest success not just for autistic people, but for the workforce at large,” Carver said.

The Post Recommends

Ex-mayor charged in 4-year-old’s rape said girl was a willing participant, records say

"I did it," Richard Keenan, a former mayor of Hubbard, Ohio, reportedly told his wife, according to court records.

The Morning Joe set says the Trump tax bombshell is no big deal. They’re very, very wrong.

This is a very big story, in both political and substantive terms.
Tuesday’s VP debate will be all about Clinton and Trump

Pence and Kaine prepare to defend their running mates in their first and only face-off.