

SILICON VALLEY BUSINESS JOURNAL

COVER STORY

'A wave of talent is coming at us'

SILICON VALLEY EMPLOYERS LIKE SAP, VISA AND EY SEEK JOB CANDIDATES WITH AUTISM, ADHD, DYSLEXIA AND OTHER NEURODIVERSE DIAGNOSES.

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In a modest classroom in San Jose, three men in their 20s listen as their 42-year-old teacher shows them a photo of a floppy disk. As a self-effacing joke, he asks if they recognize the outdated piece of technology.

"Yes. The floppy disk is an early storage medium for computer devices, much like film," a student named John Peter McGrath calls out, without skipping a beat. "Material that is a film before it has been evolved by solid metallic cartridges as a more stable storage medium."

"That is exactly correct," Ranga Jayaraman says with a kind laugh at McGrath's disarmingly literal response.

Jayaraman, sitting off to the side of the classroom, is a former tech executive who has been directing the Neurodiversity Pathways program at Goodwill of Silicon Valley's headquarters on North Seventh Street for the last two years. The program formed after the job training initiative Expandability was absorbed into Goodwill of Silicon Valley in 2016 and rebranded in 2018 as Neurodiversity Pathways.

The six-week program targets college-educated young adults who, like McGrath, identify as "neurodiverse" – an umbrella term that includes diagnoses like autism, ADHD, Tourette syndrome, dyslexia, dyspraxia (which affects physical coordination) and dyscalculia (difficulty with numbers). Many of the program participants have been on the autism spectrum, a diagnosis that affects about 1 in 59 people, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

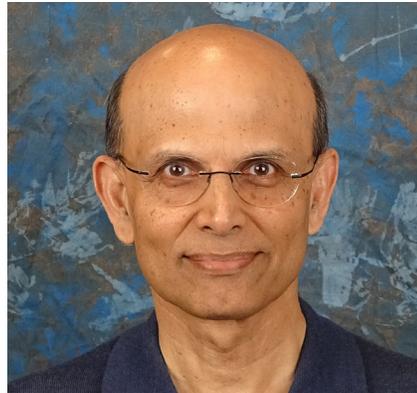
Many of the program's students, who enter in small cohorts that usually have between three and nine participants, have the kind of high-tech skills and college degrees that Silicon Valley recruiters drool over, but struggle with the interpersonal skills needed to ace a job interview.

Jayaraman's program trains all of its job candidates in a basic set of data analytics skills along with "personal effectiveness skills" – foundational habits like regular sleep, exercise, good nutrition, meditation and other coping skills for stress and anxiety – and "workplace effectiveness skills" – communication, collaboration, teamwork, giving and receiving feedback, presentation, storytelling and conflict resolution.

A number of program graduates have gone on to land high-paying jobs with employers like the Big Four accounting and professional services firm Ernst & Young, Visa Inc. and Stanford University, which recruit out of the program. Though not all students have the background for high-tech roles – some are placed in clerical jobs, for example – Jayaraman said he's seen some students go from unemployed to earning \$95,000 to \$183,000 per year in entry-level tech positions.

That success is no coincidence. Across Silicon Valley, employers are seeking out young workers who think differently.

And they're not just doing it out of charity



COURTESY PHOTO

Ranga Jayaraman, the former chief information officer of Stanford's Graduate School of Business, Nvidia Corp., now directs the Neurodiversity Pathways program at Goodwill of Silicon Valley.

or for diversity PR: Companies say many of their neurodiverse employees learn technical skills quickly, maintain focus for long periods of time and demand a kind of direct, literal communication that makes teams function better.

While Neurodiversity Pathways focuses on workplace readiness and connecting candidates to jobs, employers throughout the Valley are seeking to adjust their hiring processes and workplaces to accommodate neurodiverse talent.

SAP is a particular frontrunner in the movement. The multinational software company, which has offices in Palo Alto and South San Francisco, founded its Autism at Work Program in 2013.

Today, the program employs about 175 people in 14 countries, about 17 of whom work in the Bay Area. When including internships, apprenticeships and contract opportunities, SAP has offered a total of 400 positions over the years to neurodiverse candidates.

Jose Velasco, the head of SAP's Autism at Work program and the father of two autistic young adults, said there's a strong business case for hiring neurodiverse people.

"We want to attract the best talent that we have in our industry, and talent comes in many, many different expressions, including the autistic expression," Velasco said. "We have a wave of talent that is neurodiverse that is coming at us, companies like ours, and it's really in our best interest to tap and to learn how to create the success path for these individuals that may need a different path to the enterprise."

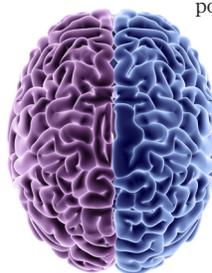
Some employees on the autism spectrum, for example, have "incredible memory" or a talent for pattern recognition, Velasco said. "It's not something that is manifested in everybody, but in those cases where it is, those are very, very important capabilities that we can use in our

GLOSSARY

WHAT FALLS UNDER THE NEURODIVERSITY LABEL

Neurodiversity is a term popularized in the 1990s by sociologist Judy Singer that includes a range of diagnoses.

According to the Stanford Neurodiversity Project, the concept of neurodiversity "regards individuals with differences in brain function and behavioral traits as



part of normal variation in the human population," and the movement around neurodiversity seeks to utilize the talents of neurodiverse people "to increase innovation and productivity of the society as a whole."

These are some of the diagnoses that are commonly grouped under the "neurodiversity" umbrella, according to the National Institutes of Health and the National Institute of Mental Health:

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder: Marked by an ongoing pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity; often referred to by its initials, ADHD.

Autism spectrum disorder: A range of conditions that can include difficulty with communication, restricted interests, repetitive behaviors and symptoms that hurt a person's ability to function properly in school and work. One type is Asperger's syndrome, which is considered a milder form of autism.

Bipolar disorder: A condition that causes unusual shifts in mood, energy, activity levels, concentration, and the ability to carry out day-to-day tasks.

Dyscalculia: Difficulty with basic arithmetic skills despite normal intelligence. Between 20 percent and 60 percent of those affected have another disorder, like dyslexia or attention deficit disorder.

Dyslexia: A learning disability that hinders reading despite normal intelligence. Dyslexics may have difficulty with the manipulation of sounds, spelling and/or rapid visual-verbal responding.

Dyspraxia: An impairment in the ability to plan and carry out sensory and motor tasks despite normal intelligence. Can include poor balance and coordination.

Nonverbal learning disorder: A difficulty in processing nonverbal information, including visual, spatial and tactile perception.

Tourette syndrome: Characterized by repetitive, stereotyped, involuntary movements and vocalizations called tics.

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Eric Song, 26, who graduated from Neurodiversity Pathways last summer, now works as a systems analyst at Visa's Palo Alto office.

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companies," he said.

To tap into that talent base, companies are offering extended and alternative interview processes tailored to neurodiverse candidates, such as sharing a list of interview questions ahead of time, hosting candidates at the office for a multiday visit or avoiding the "job interview" label in order to reduce the candidate's anxiety.

Raye Keslensky, a 33-year-old who graduated from Neurodiversity Pathways in 2018, said a hiring manager at Stanford's Neurodiversity in IT program had tried "incredibly hard to convince me that this was just a conversation and not an interview, because of whatever nonsense I had built up in my head in terms of interview anxiety and whatnot."

The tactic worked: Keslensky was hired in October as a Salesforce developer through the initiative, which is a subset of Stanford's Neurodiversity at Work program and has hired four people in the last year.

Keslensky is on the autism spectrum and has spoken with a stutter since childhood.

Despite having a master's degree in human-computer interaction from the Georgia Institute of Technology, she said it took her years to find a full-time job in tech as she did mostly freelance work. Part of that was the challenge of interviews, where Keslensky said sometimes interviewers thought her midsentence pauses were the phone connection dropping out.

As the years stacked up without salaried work, Keslensky said it was difficult to demonstrate her

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employability without references from full-time jobs.

"I'd go through periods where I'd answer every recruiter that talked to me and try to have an interview lined up, at least one each week," Keslensky said. "I got burnt out on that because I would keep having these situations where I'd get one interview, tops, with a lot of these people, or the recruiters would just be, like, 'OK, do you actually have any references outside of school?'"

Eric Song, a 26-year-old on the autism spectrum who graduated from Neurodiversity Pathways last summer, said he was given interview questions in advance, which helped him prepare his thoughts. "If you're blindsided by a question, it could come off as you're making up something on the spot, and perhaps it sounds like you don't know what you're talking about," Song said. "When in reality, you're

just trying to dig through a pool of history that may be buried somewhere in your subconscious."

Today, Song works as a systems analyst at Visa's Palo Alto office, where he said he was given first choice of where his cubicle is – an important accommodation for many on the spectrum who may have sensory sensitivity to noise, for example. Employers commonly provide noise-canceling headphones or quiet rooms to duck into to employees who may need them.

Peter Bryant Haas, 31, said he regularly has the opportunity to talk through these issues with his manager at EY's downtown San Jose office, where he was hired last year through the company's Neurodiversity Centers of Excellence program.

Haas said his stress issues, which include panic attacks, are a symptom of autism, a diagnosis he received in his late 20s. The EY program he is now a part of employs 80 people in five cities, including 16 in San Jose.

Hiren Shukla, who founded EY's national neurodiversity program almost five years ago, said the neurodiverse employees work on projects with a focus on artificial intelligence, blockchain, cybersecurity, data sciences, data analytics, data visualization and emerging technology.

"They work across all of EY, so we're supporting our clients and our business needs across the entire firm," Shukla said. "We're hiring these individuals not because it's a nice thing to do ... We've got a really strong business need, and these individuals have tremendous talent."