


Thorkil Sonne: Recruit Autistics

By Drake Bennett 

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Photo: Andrew Zbihlyj

 **Most occupations** require people skills. But for some, a preternatural capacity for concentration and near-total recall matter more. Those jobs, entrepreneur [Thorkil Sonne](#) says, could use a little autism.

Sonne reached this conclusion six years ago, after his youngest son was diagnosed with the mysterious developmental disorder. "At first I was in agony and despair," he recalls. "Then came the thought of what happens when he grows up."

In Sonne's native Denmark, as elsewhere, autistics are typically considered unemployable. But Sonne worked in IT, a field more suited to people with autism and related conditions like Asperger's syndrome. "As a general view, they have excellent memory and strong attention to detail. They are persistent and good at following structures and routines," he says. In other words, they're born software engineers.

In 2004, Sonne quit his job at a telecom firm and founded [Specialisterne](#) (Danish for "Specialists"), an IT consultancy that hires mostly people with autism-spectrum disorders. Its nearly 60 consultants ferret out software errors for companies like Microsoft and Cisco Systems. Recently, the firm has expanded into other detail-centered work—like keeping track of Denmark's fiber-optic network, so crews laying new lines don't accidentally cut old ones.

Turning autism into a selling point does require a little extra effort: Specialisterne employees typically complete a five-month training course, and clients must be prepared for a somewhat unusual working relationship. But once on the job, the consultants stay focused beyond the point when most minds go numb. As a result, they make far fewer mistakes. One client who hired Specialisterne workers to do data entry found that they were five to 10 times more precise than other contractors.

Sonne recently handed off day-to-day operations to start a foundation dedicated to spreading his business model. Already, companies inspired by Specialisterne have sprouted in Sweden, the Netherlands, and Belgium. Similar efforts are planned for Iceland and Scotland. "This is not cheap labor, and it's not occupational therapy," he says. "We simply do a better job."

[The Truth About Autism: Scientists Reconsider What They *Think* They Know](#)

[A Researcher's Puzzles Point to the Differences in the Autistic Brain](#)