

Eye for detail makes autism a plus at SAP

SOME employers increasingly are viewing autism as an asset and not a deficiency in the workplace.

Germany-based software company SAP has been actively seeking people with autism for jobs, not because of charitable outreach but because it believes features of autism may make some individuals better at certain jobs than those without autism.

It's a worthy initiative, according to disability experts, since 85 per cent of adults with autism are estimated to be unemployed.

Piloted in Germany, India and Ireland, the program is also launching in four North American offices, according to an announcement yesterday.

SAP aimed to have up to 1 per cent of its workforce — about 650 people — be employees with autism by 2020, said Jose Velasco, head of the autism initiative at SAP.

People with autism spectrum disorder — characterised by social deficits and repetitive behaviour — tended to pay great attention to detail, which may make them well suited as software testers or debuggers, according to Mr Velasco, who has two children with the condition.

In addition, these people brought a different perspective to the workplace, which might help with efficiency and creativity as well, he said.

"They have a very structured nature" and like non-ambiguous, precise outcomes, Mr Velasco said. "We're looking at those strengths and looking at where those traits would be of value to the organisation."

Autistic employees at SAP take on roles such as identifying software problems, and assigning customer-service queries to members of the team for troubleshooting.

One employee works in

"talent marketing", issuing communications to employees internally. The company is looking for someone to produce videos and is considering an applicant with autism who has experience in media arts.

SAP is also considering other positions, such as writing manuals to give clients very precise instructions on how to install software.

Individuals with autism might excel at going step by step, without skipping details that others might miss, Mr Velasco said. The business procurement process, such as getting invoices or managing the supply chain, was another area in which an individual with autism might shine, he said.

SAP isn't the only company to have such a program. In the US, mortgage lender Freddie Mac has offered career-track internships since 2012, including in IT, finance and research.

The lender hired its first full-time employee from the program in January, according to a Freddie Mac spokeswoman. In IT, the company has found that interns often perform well in testing and data-modelling jobs that require great attention to detail and focus as well as a way of seeing things that might not have been anticipated by the developers.

"Harnessing the unique skills of people on the autism spectrum has the potential to strengthen our business and make us more competitive," according to the lender's policy.

To be sure, as with any group, people with autism have a range of interests and abilities. SAP is working with a Danish autism-focused training and consultancy firm, Specialisterne, which carefully screens and interviews the candidates to find the appropriate matches before sending them to SAP to evaluate.