

The Roche Inclusive Internship Program – How F. Hoffmann-La Roche AG Supports People on the Autism Spectrum to Prepare for the Job Market

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The Current Situation in Switzerland

People on the autism spectrum are particularly disadvantaged in terms of employment. Even though many have the ability and desire to work, less than 9% find employment on the open market (Eckert, 2015). People on the autism spectrum are also more likely to be unemployed in comparison to individuals with other disabilities (Shattuck et al., 2012; Roux et al., 2013). Once in employment, they are often in jobs for which they are overqualified and unsuited (Baldwin et al., 2014, Romoser, 2000). In addition, many find it difficult to hold down a job and switch jobs frequently (Müller et al., 2003), in many instances due to issues related to their autism.

Switzerland ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities in 2014, including Article 27 which recognizes the right of persons with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others. However, very little progress has been made with regard to improving the employment chances of people on the autism spectrum.

Employment of people on the autism spectrum is not only important for their well-being and sense of independence. There are also benefits for the government in terms of savings on financial support. Furthermore, organisations that hire people on the autism spectrum profit from their unique skills and abilities such as attention to detail and excellent memory, high-quality work, typically low absence rates and a culture of inclusion.

Considering the fact that many organisations are struggling to find people with the skill sets they need, we must ask ourselves why there is not enough support for people on the autism spectrum to enter and remain in the job market.

Low autism awareness and failure to make minor adjustments in the workplace are two of the main barriers to employment for people on the autism spectrum. Switzerland needs employment initiatives that focus on making adjustments tailored to meet the needs of the individual, as well as providing person-centered training for employers and mentoring and support for employees. One such employment initiative has recently been started at F. Hoffmann-La Roche AG in Basel.

The Roche Inclusive Internship Program

F. Hoffmann-La Roche AG launched the Inclusive Internship Program in 2017 in Basel. It is open to people with varying disabilities, ranging from physical disabilities to neurodevelopmental conditions, such as autism. Placements offered range from 6 weeks to up to one year, depending on the candidate, the type of role and the availability of the line manager. Internships so far have given candidates the opportunity to gain experience in either a research or a business setting. To date, five internships have been offered and several more are currently under discussion.

Three of the five interns are on the autism spectrum and they already successfully completed their internships. In order to facilitate these internships, specific arrangements were necessary. These included reviewing job descriptions to make them more easily understandable and relevant, adapting job tasks to make them more structured, organizing employee information sessions to raise awareness for the topic of neurodiversity and autism, and training team members and line managers on the specific requirements of the individual. In addition, a job coach supported the intern as well as the line

manager before and during the internship, and a workplace buddy was appointed to help the intern find their way around and to understand everyday workplace practices. Workplace adjustments, such as the use of headphones, special light-filtering glasses or a quiet workspace, were introduced to enable the intern to cope with sensory issues, and at the end of the internships, a networking meeting was organized to share experiences and key learnings with the wider organization.

Meet those involved

For a project like this to be successful, initiative as well as cooperative participants are needed. To give you some insights, we interviewed two of the interns as well as a line manager, a workplace buddy and the job coach. The first internship was in the Global Product Strategy Department in the team of Hemerson Paes and accompanied by his colleague, Dr. Lea Proulx. Kayla*, who holds a Masters Degree in Systems Biology, received a contract for a 3.5-month period and was responsible for intranet-related projects. The second internship was in the Pharma Research and Early Development (pRED) Site Finance Department in the team of Marie Machat. Amos, who is studying International Business Management, worked for a 2-month period on finance-related projects. Both internships were accompanied by the job coach, Kim Rüfenacht, from the company Aspergers at Work GmbH. Hear from them directly how they experienced the internships:

What was your motivation for participating in the Roche Inclusive Internship Program?

Kayla, intern: *It has been an opportunity to work at F. Hoffmann-La Roche AG and in an environment where I could disclose my Asperger**.*

Marie, line manager: *pRED Finance wants to actively contribute to a workplace where people with and without disabilities can thrive together. We believe that an inclusive work environment increases organizational flexibility and the ability to learn from people at all levels.*

Amos, intern: *I wanted to apply the theoretical knowledge I have acquired at university into practice as well as gain a first insight into the working world.*

What were your main experiences of the Roche Inclusive Internship Program and what worked well?

Lea, workplace buddy: *Having the opportunity to provide Kayla with projects fitting her skills and interests allowed her to be successful in her delivery. Also, having a clear and regular schedule was helpful for both of us.*

Marie, line manager: *Aspergers at Work GmbH helped us a lot by finding the right candidate and we are still looking for more candidates who want to gain experience in the work environment, Roche & Finance.*

Kayla, intern: *Due to my disclosure I could get accommodations like having a desk with day light and without too much background noise. The people approached me very openly and invited me to many coffee breaks.*

Kim, job coach: *It was great to see that not only people on the autism spectrum but also team members profited from the experience.*

What was difficult?

Lea, workplace buddy: *It took me a few days to realize I had to adapt my conversation style to avoid creating additional stress for my colleague. It might sound simple but when you're used to covering several topics in one discussion and having answers like "maybe", "we'll see later" or "let me get back to you on this", taking the time to clearly address each question with a specific answer, whether or not you have the correct answer, isn't done automatically!*

Kim, job coach: One particular difficulty is that no two internships are alike. Each person will have different abilities and needs. If awareness of autism is low and the team has not yet got to know the individual, then care and time is needed to raise awareness and to manage expectations.

How have you or your team benefited from this experience?

Lea, workplace buddy: Being part of the program allowed the team to better understand the reality of people on the autism spectrum, an indication for which F. Hoffmann-La Roche AG is developing a new molecule. It also allowed us to really understand the importance of connecting with our team members when working on a specific project.

Kayla, intern: This internship gave me lots of opportunities to network and led to my current job at F. Hoffmann-La Roche AG. And I had another positive experience that disclosure is a good thing and my fears of rejection or prejudices were not justified.

Amos, intern: It has given me a real industry insight, provided me with some extremely valuable contacts for my future and the confidence that I have chosen the right path to pursue. I was able to learn how to integrate into a working team and how to then communicate in order to have a successful working relationship.

What is needed to make a program like this successful?

Lea, workplace buddy: For me, you need a clear buy-in from every party engaged in the project. The team needs to have specific information about autism and to understand how to work with, and what to expect from, the newcomer. This isn't about putting a label on people joining a team, it's simply to ensure everyone understands how to adequately support the person. Also, take the time to have an introduction meeting before jumping directly into project-specific discussions and make sure a clear contact person is assigned for the intern whom she can reach out to outside of the regular meeting time.

Kayla, intern: I think that a team which is open for diversity is key to be an inclusive environment for such an internship.

Kim, job coach: It is important to have an open mindset and to be flexible. People on the autism spectrum, who think and work differently, can add valuable insights into how processes and working methods can be improved.

Marie, line manager: Amos brought his own view and solutions, which was an added-value for us to move on with certain topics with a fresh mindset.

What can neurotypicals learn from people on the autism spectrum, and vice versa?

Kayla, intern: Neurotypicals, when accepting people on the autism spectrum, can learn not to judge a person too fast by the first impression.

Kim, job coach: People on the autism spectrum can learn how to navigate in a neurotypical world. Neurotypicals on the other hand start to question their own methods and ways of working.

How can organizations like F. Hoffmann-La Roche AG support people on the autism spectrum?

Amos, intern: Organizations like F. Hoffmann-La Roche AG can offer more job opportunities for people on the autism spectrum, not just in the form of internships but also in the form of permanent employment. The more experience employers have with autism, the more they will come to appreciate the benefits of a neurodiverse workforce.

What advice would you give to other individuals/companies wanting to give people on the autism spectrum a chance to work?

***Kayla, intern:** It is important to be open and tolerant towards the individual and special needs of people on the autism spectrum to give them the chance to realize their full potential.*

***Marie, line manager:** First of all, get the support of the Line Management. Carmen Kerschbaum, Global Head of pRED Finance, immediately agreed to support the initiative and was really engaged with the topic. Secondly, be well prepared and inform the team to make sure that reticence or questions are clarified. It has helped us a lot to work with Aspergers at Work GmbH to have a contact person whom I could ask in case of question or uncertainty.*

***Kim, job coach:** Keep an open mind and give it a try! Get the appropriate support and do not fall into the trap of thinking that, if you have met one person with autism, that all people on the autism spectrum will be the same.*

The Way Forward

The experiences gained from the Roche Inclusive Internship Program illustrate that integrating people on the autism spectrum has benefits for all who are involved. Making the necessary adjustments ultimately benefits organizations: it allows them to tap into the unique skills and traits of people on the autism spectrum to match their needs, while improving internal processes, communication and organizational flexibility. In addition, the implementation of such programs significantly contributes to employee satisfaction. For people on the autism spectrum, being able to openly communicate their autism and having the opportunity to work in an environment which makes adjustments that meet their needs, has a tremendous positive impact on their personal and professional lives. Programs such as the Roche Inclusive Internship Program are a vital and important first step in helping to close the autism employment gap and to work towards achieving the goals outlined in Article 27 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Realizing the benefits of such a program, F. Hoffmann-La Roche AG is continuing to offer such internships, and other companies are also starting to offer similar internship programs. But much work still needs to be done. While organizations throughout Switzerland are continuing to raise awareness for autism and to educate on the topic, the government needs to focus their efforts on financing autism-specific support services, such job coaching, as well as resources for people on the autism spectrum and organizations who want to hire them. The recent decision of the Swiss government on October 17, 2018 to improve support for the integration of people on the autism spectrum into vocational training and in the job market is an encouraging development. Yet the implementation still needs to be coordinated and responsibilities must be assigned in order to support people on the autism spectrum and have a positive impact on the current employment statistics.

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* pseudonym

** Asperger Syndrome is a form of autism

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