

DECLAN\* IS ON THE AUTISM SPECTRUM.

He struggles with eye contact.

He doesn't interview well for jobs.

He is uncomfortable in a suit.

But Declan can focus

for long periods of time

analyzing information that

others would find exhausting.

He brings a unique approach

to solving problems.

He sees patterns

in data that others miss.

Declan isn't disabled,

Declan is a specialist.

# The Specialists



There is an organization in Ireland that values people like Declan and the thousands of others on the island of Ireland who are on the autism spectrum. Specialisterne is a social business concept that matches people on the autism spectrum with jobs primarily within the IT sector and in technically-oriented fields. Specialisterne is tackling the fact that 85% of those on the spectrum in Ireland, are currently unemployed.

The non-profit was established in Denmark in 2004 (Specialisterne is Danish for “the specialists”) and has expanded to Ireland thanks to founding members Frank Holt and Peter Brabazon, who both have sons with Aspergers. Specialisterne has assessed hundreds of people across Ireland and is placing individuals into employment at some of Ireland’s top companies including SAP, Microsoft and Intel. The partnership with these employers extends well beyond the placement. Specialisterne remains as a resource to each company ensuring that employment opportunities flourish. Their long term vision is to enable 5,000 jobs for people with autism and similar challenges across Ireland.

#### THE ASSESSMENT

Candidates come to Specialisterne first so that they can establish what the individual’s skills and interests are. Often, the assessment includes a hands-on test involving the assembly of a robotic object. This is not intended to see how someone would simply “assemble something”, but assesses the candidate’s approach to problem solving. Do they like to work in a team or alone? Are they able to jump into something quickly or do they need more explanation? Each aspect helps determine where they will perform best and be happiest in a work environment.

“You can’t get to know somebody over an interview for a half an hour with everyone sitting behind a table,” says Debbie Merrigan, Assessment Director at Specialisterne. “You’re investing in them. So I want to see how that person will work in a team, how they think. It’s important to get to see the person relax. Often with Asperger’s, for example, people can be nervous and have low confidence. Our tailored assessment process helps us see the candidate’s best attributes.”

#### THE SKILLS

Specialisterne recognizes that each person is unique and has a different skill set. Yet there are special skills that many candidates on the autism spectrum often bring to the marketplace. An affinity for repetition, strength with logic, an ability to see patterns and themes in data or words, these are all skills that tech companies value.

Kristen Doran is the Senior Human Resources Business Partner for SAP Ireland. At SAP Ireland, Kristen has been the local lead on the ‘Autism at Work Programme’ partnering with Specialisterne. “We started working with Specialisterne at the end of 2012. We have six people now employed through the program, between our two sites in Galway and Dublin.”

As a company, SAP has been noted for their commitment to providing employment opportunities to people on the autism spectrum. But that commitment stretches far beyond social responsibility.

**“This is about innovation and driving innovation by people who are on the spectrum because we think they are going to bring different perspective to the way we do our work,” explains Kristen. “It’s been proven in studies that it actually increases employee engagement, profitability, and the success of an organization.”**

According to Kristen, the entire team at SAP benefits. “We now understand that if someone is on the autism spectrum they can be high-functioning and can add a lot of value. It has made people more open-minded within the organization about how they do their own jobs because they see people who approach it in a different way.”

The Ireland Funds are proud to support Specialisterne in their work to bridge employment needs and opportunities with the autism community in Ireland.

**“Specialisterne has enabled me to work in a job I love. The people here are very friendly and I really enjoy the work here.”**

—Nick, working at Microsoft since 2013

\*names have been changed