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The Autism Embassy: enabling large organisations to embrace diversity



Diederik Weve, Chairman of **PAS Nederland**, an autistic lead organisation for autistic adults, and Drs Marinka Traas, Project Leader, **Vanuit Autisme Bekeken**, give an insight into the Autism Embassy Project. The project aims for autistic employees to be agents for change, enabling large organisations to embrace diversity and enhance inclusion.

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The Autism Embassy: enabling large organisations to embrace diversity

How many of you know an adult with autism/autistic adult ⁽¹⁾ who seems to be functioning well in his job? Some of you may through your profession, but for the average person such experiences are rare. Most autistic adults who function well are also able to hide their autism and chose to 'pass as normal' because they fear being associated with stereotypical autism. Such stereotypes, effective as they are in conveying a difference, can become severe obstacles to inclusion, especially when the stereotype – as is the case with autism in the Netherlands - is predominantly negative. Autism is as diverse as the people it affects and we can benefit as a society when we discover and learn to enjoy diversity.

The Autism Embassy is a project which promotes a more positive and diverse image of autism in society in order to achieve a higher level of participation. It does so by creating visible role-models: regular autistic employees in large organisations performing an extraordinary mission to interact with their colleagues and management. These Ambassadors are involved in different activities such as:

- interviews
- workshops
- expert advice
- just listening.

In doing so, they normalise interactions with autistic people as well as improve their perception of autism. More than 10 major organisations (companies & government bodies) now act as 'Autism Embassies' by supporting the approach and facilitating their ambassadors.

Autism Ambassador Diederik reflects:

"The concept for the Embassy formed while I was giving workshops at Shell. Two years after my diagnosis (aged 52) I found myself giving monthly workshops called Autism as a Diversity. In lunch-and-learn style engagements I made colleagues aware of differences between people in how they process information and the potential ensuing issues. I was unsure how to organise these sessions, or how to engage properly, so I was supported by **Shell enABLE** a Diversity & Inclusion (D&I) network for people with physical disabilities. Deaf, blind or dyslexic, they excelled at setting the stage for me, allowing me to engage with colleagues who showed an interest in D&I. They learned about autism in general and how it affects me and I learned about... people. Numerous colleagues reflected on how my 'being out' about my autism inspired them. I soon found my interviews on the intranet and myself on a new development curve for interaction skills.

The key ingredients that made this possible were:

- I wanted to disclose
- colleagues wanted to support me

management enabled our actions through policy.

I was invited to participate in the government taskforce **Vanuit Autisme Bekeken** ("viewed from autism") and this allowed me to replicate my experience at Shell as well as develop it further. This taskforce aimed to identify and address the sticky issue of autistic participation. The project "Autism Embassy" was funded for three years and Marinka Traas was appointed Project Leader based on her experiences in the field of inclusive employment. We identified autistic adults who were employed in large organisations (> 1000 staff) and we assessed with them whether their organisation was open to trying the scheme. We developed a 4-day training programme around specific themes:

Wider and non-medical views on autism: help the general population to understand that the medical view is limited and limiting. One may equally consider concepts as strengths & associated weaknesses, the social model of disability, MAS1P model, etc.

Expert by experience, communicating using vulnerability: don't try to be the autism expert explaining what should be done, instead learn to tell about your personal needs.

Building and influencing through a network: hands-on support in planning steps for finding support in your organisation and for actions. Skills to recognise and overcome resistance.

Finding and presenting your personal story: practice and feedback from the course participants and trainers improves performance and builds enough confidence to start activities as an ambassador.

The training content and facilitation were co-developed consistently by a non-autistic and an autistic subject matter expert. In this process, and through the practical experience of new ambassadors, we identified organisational conditions and personal preconditions that enable an effective approach on a larger scale. What we learned informed our information and training sessions."

Conditions for success

In order for the scheme to work effectively it requires a large organisation of 1000+ workers and a work culture sensitive to diversity and willing to invest in diversity. The scheme is effective in large organisations because it can reach a wider public (many colleagues). Large organisations are more likely to have the necessary means to support the activities. Organisations enable the role of the ambassador by:

- earmarking time for the ambassador role
- providing a budget for personal development
- offering practical support with the execution of activities.

The starting point is an open attitude of management to the role and willingness to explore the opportunity.

Preconditions

Not every employee is an appropriate autism ambassador. In order to be effective, the ambassador needs to:

- have a number of years work experience in a large organisation
- function reasonably well in their job as an accepted and valued colleague
- have a personal ambition to become 'autism ambassador'
- have received their diagnosis some time previously in order to have reached a high level of acceptance of their diagnosis
- understand their autism and the way it influences their work
- share their personal experiences (to a certain extent) and willing to develop more skills.

Since our first pilot training, we have completed two courses with seven attendees each. A third course has started this spring. 75% of trained ambassadors are active in their organisation and have found colleagues who support them. They are visible and accessible. Half of them are also active as ambassadors outside their organisation, effectively influencing society in general. These are not all engineers, financial whizz kids or computer programmers! We are proud that medical professionals have come on board too with a doctor, clinical psychologist and a nurse, women as well as men: stereotypes are there to be challenged.

We receive a lot of questions from professionals and individuals: what do we do to promote more jobs, to improve better working conditions, to help individuals? The answer is simple: we do nothing special. We just kick-start the dialogue and interaction between a minority and a majority group. But that is pretty special in itself.

(1) Note: Marinka & Diederik are both familiar with the identity/person first concept. Marinka prefers to speak about 'adults with autism' whereas Diederik prefers the term 'autistic adults'.

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