

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Framework for Integrating Persons with Autism to the Workforce

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Persons with Autism (PWAs) have unique skills and abilities to contribute to a productive workplace. Companies often do not hire them because these firms believe they have many limitations and that employing them would pose various challenges. This study determined the factors affecting the performance of PWAs, the challenges and benefits in employing them, and proposed a framework to guide employers in successfully integrating them in the workforce. A mixed-methods design was used with data collection tools such as video observations, focus group discussions and an organizational culture survey. Through the various data gathered, the challenges identified were the limited technical skills of the PWAs, their communication and social skills such as observing boundaries, their lack of focus, and physical health. However, results also presented various benefits such as the ability to outperform their peers, improved relationships through increased sensitivity and understanding. After a thorough analysis of the data, the study presented two frameworks. From these challenges and benefits, one framework showed an understanding of PWA employee attributes. These PWA employee attributes consisted of cognitive skills, social skills, technical skills, and health. The other framework had identified the different facets in making the PWA achieve optimal performance in the workplace. These facets were physical layout, task matching, and organization.

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Persons with autism spectrum disorder (PWAs) need employment and are eager to be part of the workforce. Being employed allows them to support themselves, thereby unburdening their families and giving them a sense of purpose that helps build confidence. Unemployed disabled people have lower scores on life quality indicators compared to the general unemployed population (Ballo, 2019). Despite these findings, however, there is low participation, over education, and early retirement among employed PWAs (Frank et al., 2018; Hendricks, 2010). They are

less likely to be employed in the community than those without ASD, after controlling for age, health, mobility, gender, level of ID, and challenging behavior (Nord, Stancliffe, Nye-Lengerman, & Hewitt, 2016).

In the Philippines, some large companies such as the SM Group have provided opportunities for PWA to be employed, (Adel, 2018). In addition, the Autism Society of the Philippines (ASP), through their program “Autism-Ok Philippines” is also working to help PWAs find employment that recognizes their capabilities and provides appropriate compensation

(Adel, 2018). Since 2015, more than 200 jobs have been given to PWAs in 53 establishments across ten provinces in the Philippines (Reyes, 2019). However, based on the study of Gan, Go, and Ong (2018), employers' negative attitudes affect the employment opportunities of PWAs.

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a disability that involves difficulties in communication and social interaction and repetitive behaviors. For neurotypical workers with this disability, the difficulty includes sorting or counting. (Seva, 2020). Women with high autism traits have negative experiences and are less likely to stay in a job (Ballo, 2019; Hayward, McVilly, & Stokes, 2018). Adverse experiences include bullying from staff and management that caused them to quit the job eventually. Employers may also not understand the disability and become unhelpful, causing overwhelming stress to the employee (Griffith, Totsika, Nash, & Hastings, 2011). Due to lack of knowledge about the disability, interaction in the workplace can be problematic due to perceptions of acceptable behavior in the professional context. Co-workers tend to care for PWDs, but it can result in stigmatization (Mik-Meyer, 2016).

The literature on autism and employment focus on preparing people with autism for employment such as identifying skills and characteristics appropriate for jobs that match their interests (Gal, Landes, & Katz, 2015; Holwerda, van der Klink, de Boer, Groothoff, & Brouwer, 2013) and support systems for finding and securing employment (García Iriarte, O'Brien, McConkey, Wolfe, & O'Doherty, 2014; Wehman, Revell, & Kregel, 1998).

Management literature has just started to focus on employing PWDs from the organization's perspective (Markel & Elia, 2016). The role of employers in mentoring and providing co-workers with knowledge on the disorder has been identified as essential factors in promoting job retention (Ham, McDonough, Molinelli, Schall, & Wehman, 2014; Markel & Elia, 2016). Accommodations by co-workers may not be taken well by PWDs because they do not want to be treated differently. Markel and Elia (2016) emphasized the need to continuously provide guidance and support to those going to interact with them, such as providing autism awareness seminars. Psychoeducation can be given to co-workers, human resources practitioners, business leaders, supervisors and other workplace representatives to correct misconceptions about

people with mental health conditions and reduce fear and isolation (Akabas & Kurzman, 2005; Javier, Demeterio, Habaradas, Jabar, & Resurreccion, 2014).

Organizational culture can also affect the performance of PWAs. This refers to the set of shared values and norms held by employees, which guides employees' interactions with peers, management, and clients/ customers (Morgan, 1998). Studies have shown that organizational culture affects employees' satisfaction on the job and their commitment to stay in the company (O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Only a few companies in the Philippines employ PWDs, and to the best knowledge of the authors, there has been no previous study that characterized the organizational culture of these companies. A prevailing culture among Filipinos is "barkadahan" or clinging to people with the same characteristics and interest. Without a strong organizational culture that supports the hiring of PWDs, the common culture can take over and hinder the positive interaction of PWAs with peers and supervisors.

The number of employed PWAs in the Philippines is increasing, but there is limited investigation of the factors affecting organizations' performance. Research on PWA employment have primarily been conducted in first-world countries where support for PWD employment is well established. Seva (2020) assessed the productivity of PWAs in terms of time on task, work attitude, and task compatibility in the Philippines, but these are limited aspects of performance. The success of employing PWAs depends on organizational and environmental factors. The limitations of PWAs may require special accommodations for them to be able to exhibit their effectiveness as a member of the organization. Thus, this study aims to determine the factors affecting the performance of PWAs, the challenges, and benefits in employing them, and propose a framework that can guide employers in successfully integrating them in the workforce.

The framework proposed in this study can be used by companies as a guide for successfully integrating PWAs in their workforce. Results of the study will contribute to the practice of Industrial Psychology. Clinical and Counseling Psychologists will likewise benefit since results of this study may aid them in handling adult individuals with Autism and their families.

METHODOLOGY

Mixed research methods were used to accomplish the objectives of the study. The research process was divided into three segments as follows:

Phase 1: Personal interviews

At the beginning of the study, personal interviews were conducted with PWA employees, coworkers, and supervisors. PWA employees were asked about the nature of their work, support obtained from their coworkers, challenges faced on the job, and assessment of their tasks. Coworkers related the strengths of the PWA employees and the challenges in working with them. On the other hand, supervisors provided an overview of the process of assigning tasks to the employees, their performance, and the company's preparation prior to employing PWAs. The supervisors also discussed the strengths of the PWA employees and challenges in supervision.

Phase 2: Observation

Video footage of PWAs in the workplace were taken after getting the informed consent of their guardians. The length of observation varied per company because of time and security constraints. The video observations were used to determine the type of tasks given to PWAs and their level of engagement.

Phase 3: Survey

Organizational culture was assessed using the Organizational Culture Profile (OCP) Survey of O'Reilly et al. (1991) consisting of 29 survey questions clustered into 7 culture dimensions, namely; competitiveness, emphasis on rewards, innovation, performance orientation, social responsibility, stability and support dimensions (See Appendix A). The participants of the survey are the people directly involved in the work process of the PWAs, since they are the members of the organization that influences the performance and job assignments of the PWA employees. The participants were selected through the assistance of the HR Manager.

Qualitative and quantitative data were gathered from the participants. Quantitative were obtained from the survey, while qualitative data came from interviews to substantiate their answers to the survey. Interview questions focused on the reasons for high and low ratings given for the culture dimension.

The survey and interview took around 30 minutes per participant.

For NSD, 18 employees, including three PWAs answered the survey. For ATT, eight persons participated that includes one PWA.

As a form of appreciation, the clinical psychologist from the research team conducted free psychoeducation for the two companies for their participation.

Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured in the handling of the data. This research protocol was approved in 2018 by the De La Salle University Research Ethics Review Committee (REO protocol code: DLSU-IR.012.2017-2018.T2.GCOE).

3 CASE STUDY 1: NSD

NSD is a large drugstore chain in the Philippines established in 1937. At present, the company has 400 stores spread all over the Philippines. They employ more than 20 PWAs since 2017 that are given routine tasks such as encoding, shelving and even keeping company confidential information.

Participants' Profile

Three PWAs participated in the study assigned to different jobs. Job assignments were based on a preliminary assessment done by the human resources (HR) department considering their educational background and level of maturity.

Out of the three participants observed Oscar is the only one with a structured task with clear performance measure. His main task is encoding invoices from a source document and typing them into the computer. The encoding task takes up approximately 80% of his time. The remaining tasks involved sorting, filing, and tagging invoices. He is one of several employees assigned to do this variety of tasks. The output of each worker in Oscar's department is monitored daily with a target of 100 invoices. During the first six months at NSD, Oscar found difficulty in meeting the target. However, one year later, he consistently met the target and was given more challenging tasks by the supervisor, such as posting invoices. He is mostly focused on his work but can be easily distracted by other people around him.

The second participant is Marianne, who works in the human resource department as a clerk. She oversees the filing of examinations, encoding, evaluation and preparing logistics during training. She is the most

mature among the three participants and was described as caring by her coworkers. She has an excellent memory and focuses on her work.

The third participant is Ronald, whose main task is to file and sort pay slips. He devotes 70% of his time filing documents. He excels at mechanical tasks but finds it difficult to focus. He has the maturity of a five-year-old and is easily distracted by food or water.

Performance Shaping Factors

Participants in this company were observed for several days to determine their level of engagement at work. Engagement is defined as the percentage of time the participant was busy during the 4 days of observation. Observation was done systematically every 5 minutes. The most engaged among the three is Oscar at 87%, followed by Marianne at 84%. Ronald has the lowest engagement at 67%.

All three participants have no attendance issues. They come to the office very early and find it rewarding to work. They enjoy their work and look forward to each working day because they can do something productive rather than stay at home. They are all trainable and can learn fast if the task suits them. Marianne has a very good memory and can focus on her work. Marianne and Oscar are very cooperative, but Ronald can sometimes be challenging to deal with. He cannot concentrate when he is hungry, making him unwilling to cooperate when required to do so. All of them can work independently given the proper instructions.

Physical environment

In this company, all employees work physically close to each other because of the limited space available. They are seated on tables placed adjacent to each other. The work area is separated from the corridor with chest-high partitions. This workplace layout easily distracts PWA employees especially Ronald who is located near the main door. One of his co-workers said:

“He is easily distracted by food or water. When the water delivery person arrives, he is easily agitated.”

Ronald’s supervisor realized this, so she sometimes isolates Ronald in a vacant room so he can concentrate.

Oscar can also be easily distracted, but his workstation is located at the end of a long corridor that is not usually accessed by delivery personnel minimizing sources of distraction.

Task

The supervisors of the PWAs attribute the good performance of their employees with ASD to task matching. Prior to employing PWAs, several people from the HR department were given psychoeducation by the UNILAB Foundation through the Project Inclusion. The seminar helped them match the applicants to available jobs in different departments.

They assigned tasks that were challenging enough to prevent them from losing focus. A task that is too simple can cause boredom and demotivate the employee. However, they were careful not to make it too challenging such that the person might be discouraged and become easily distracted.

The high engagement of Oscar was brought about by appropriate task matching. His task is highly repeatable and structured. The most common suggestion of the participants to increase productivity is to provide structure.

The tasks of Marianne and Ronald are uniquely assigned to them. They were given tasks that are considered uninteresting by neurotypical people. These tasks vary from time to time, but the supervisors have learned to assign tasks that they can do well, such as sorting and filing. Marianne’s tasks are more diverse compared to Ronald. She interacts with people in the HR department and reminds them of scheduled meetings and events. Her co-workers are impressed by her good memory and compassion for other people, making her suitable as an assistant in the human resource department. Ronald’s task does not require him to interact with other people. However, he takes the initiative to greet others during break times. Ronald is primarily involved in sorting payslips because of his proficiency in doing this task. His supervisor and co-workers are impressed at the speed and accuracy of his performance in sorting payslips.

Organization and management

Aside from task matching, all participants agreed that coaching and supervision are effective. The supervisor mainly provides coaching. This was explained by one of the team leaders:

“Coaching is helpful to him. He needs someone to teach him how to do things. He listens to his teachers. He is more afraid of his teacher than his mother... The coach should be present because if not, he has the tendency to sleep.”

The quality of supervision affects participants' performance because they are in direct contact with them every day. For PWAs with a low level of maturity, the supervisor is considered a second parent and the only authority that can control their actions. Thus, knowledge on proper handling of PWA employees is crucial in directing them properly and developing the proper behavior in the corporate setting.

Oscar's supervisor works closely with his team and immediately finds time to talk to him when there are concerns about his work. He also calls Oscar's attention whenever he loses his focus. Thus, Oscar becomes aware that any distraction or untoward behavior will not be tolerated. This helps him understand the proper decorum in the office and the team's expectation regarding his level of performance. The constant reminder keeps him on the right track. Knowing that he might not always be there, his supervisor also designated another person in his absence to monitor Oscar if he is not around. The improvement in Oscar's performance over time was brought about by his supervisor's consistent guidance and kindness.

Marianne requires minimum supervision because she can focus on her tasks and has adequate social skills. Ronald is the one in most need of supervision among the three because he finds it difficult to focus and works according to his mood. He only listens to his supervisor, and without this person, it can be difficult to control his tendency to roam around the office or when he takes unnecessary breaks. The supervisor knows that she needs to constantly remind Ronald that he needs to focus on his tasks. She also constantly interacts with the parents of Ronald so that they will also reinforce the need to work well. The parents reward Ronald for cooperating with his supervisor.

The psychoeducation obtained by the supervisor prior to employment of PWAs helped them identify appropriate strategies in dealing with their unique behaviors and is an important step in integrating PWAs in the workplace. According to the participants, the most evident effect of the psychoeducation is the increase in awareness and understanding that lead to the improvement of relationships among the members of the team. They become more accepting and patient with the limitations of their co-worker with ASD in terms of behavior and communication. One supervisor explained:

"Our relationship with them improved, especially for the employees without background in Psychology. For them it is a big help because they obtained

awareness and understanding of people with special needs...In terms of communication, they learned how to decode because they became aware that some of the verbalizations and behaviors are part of the symptoms and limitations of the PWD."

In the absence of psychoeducation, co-workers think they should tolerate childish behaviors as part of accommodation. On the contrary, these behaviors should not be reinforced so they would know norms of propriety inside the office. Each co-worker should be an automatic proxy authority in the office in the absence of a supervisor.

Providing a reward system was effective in promoting good behavior. One supervisor said:

"He is like a 5-year-old child. If you want to make him do something, you need to give rewards. You need to know what reward can motivate him. Sometimes you are punished if he did something wrong or if he was not able to do something he needs to do."

Aside from having a reward system, showing constant appreciation sustains the employee with ASD's motivation to perform well. One colleague expressed, "I think it really motivates them when we show appreciation. Even a simple 'Good job! You're good!' motivates them and encourages." He added that they do it also even to co-workers who are non-ASDs so that they can develop a culture of appreciation in their team.

Inclusion and accommodation are key factors in integrating people with ASD in the workplace. Admittedly, participants claimed that they do not have company policies on accommodation, but their unit has internal policies and programs such as conducting sensitivity training for employees and organizing activities for the PWD employees. They ask them to join meetings and small conversations so that they will not feel like an outcast. One co-worker shared:

"We have sensitivity training. Have an orientation on how to handle them, but we do not have specific policies yet...more of internal policies. We had the 'We Care a Little More Day' for our 23 PWD employees. It is a gathering filled with games. I hope soon we will have team-building with them."

Organizational Culture

The organizational culture assessment showed that the top dimensions are competitiveness, innovation, and social responsibility, as can be seen in Table 1. Competitiveness culture refers to the participant's

perception of the organization's emphasis on quality, being competitive, being distinctive, and being achievement-oriented. Validation interviews indicated that participants are aware of the company's need to adhere to strict quality standards as a retail drug chain. Their performance is vital to the health of consumers. Being one of the three major players in the drug chain industry, employees need to perform well to remain ahead of their competitors. The company's initiative to employ PWAs distinguishes them from other drug retail chains.

Table 1. Mean and Standard Deviation of the Organizational Culture scores of South Star Drug (SSD)

Dimension	Mean	SD
Competitiveness Culture	4.35	0.52
Innovation Culture	4.24	0.61
Social Responsibility Culture	4.21	0.56
Performance Orientation Culture	4.14	0.61
Stability Culture	4.13	0.61
Emphasis on Rewards Culture	4.07	0.66
Supportive Culture	3.91	0.63

Innovation culture was gauged from questions regarding participants' perception of the company being innovative, taking advantage of opportunities, risk-taking, and encouraging individual responsibility. NSD is one of the first few drug stores that initiated a real-time inventory and POS system. It recently partnered with a big mall retailing company to increase its market presence. This partnership puts them at the level of their big competitors reflecting their ability to tap into new opportunities. The employment of PWAs is also related to risk-taking since there are many options to integrate PWDs in the workplace. They could have hired people with physical impairment, but they chose to employ PWAs, for which they have gained recognition.

The social responsibility dimension is related to the company's good reputation, social responsibility, and reflectiveness. Perception of being socially responsible was contributed by the company's track record and number of years in the industry. NSD has been in existence during the post-war era and has become a household name. Participants perceive that

the company's policy on employing PWAs is a service to society and a gesture of kindness.

The company's culture that promotes competitiveness, innovation, and social responsibility help their employees keep an open mind and accept changes in the workplace. Employees think that employing PWAs is not common in the Philippines but because of NSDs inclusive employment policy they had become more tolerant of diversity. Hence, the PWA employees felt accepted and valued for their role in the organization.

Challenges in PWD Accommodation in the Workplace

The most salient challenge in working with people with special needs according to the employees of NSD is their **limited technical skills. Communication** is a great concern. Sometimes, they jump from one topic to another until the content of what they are saying becomes irrelevant to the conversation. Giving them multiple tasks and instructions at the same time is also a challenge. One of the supervisors mentioned:

"You need to be clear with your instructions or else she might interpret it differently. It is also difficult for her to follow multiple instructions, so you need to give them one by one. They also need structure. You cannot add or change your instructions easily because they just focus on what you said."

Another limitation is their **lack of social skills**, especially in observing proper **etiquette** when making conversations with others. They rarely engage in small talks and most of the time they do not filter their words. Below are a couple of examples from their colleagues.

"When communicating with customers, he will just start the conversation and will continuously talk. No 'Hi' or 'Hello, good afternoon' or 'Goodbye.' He doesn't give the person he is talking to a chance to respond. Even if we give him a spiel he tends to miss it out."

"She doesn't filter what she says even if it might offend others. For example, she said to me, 'That's English. You will not understand.' Or if you look haggard, she will tell you directly without hesitation. I know it is part of her ASD but it still hurts sometimes even if I know I should not be offended. At least she is honest."

Difficulty in observing boundaries is another concern in having a colleague with ASD. Sometimes they will ask questions that are too personal or will read

private messages of their co-workers. They will do this repeatedly even after being reminded several times. They can be very affectionate but sometimes they become overly touchy and it makes their colleagues uncomfortable. Related to this is their inability to discern what is confidential and what is not. Because of this, they are not given tasks that involve handling sensitive documents.

One of the **cognitive limitations** of people with ASD is a **lack of concentration or focus** and this is evident in the workplace. Employees with ASD can be easily distracted. The co-workers' descriptions can be read below:

"When she sees something interesting for her, she gets easily distracted and leaves her task but eventually she will get back to it on their own. Although sometimes it takes a long time for her to come back so I need to remind her"

"Sometimes, you need to call his attention several times and emphasize what you are saying or else it will not register with him. You need to make him focus. When they are focused, they are really focused. But when they get distracted, they are also really distracted."

Health is also a concern among PWAs. A common observation among employees with ASD is that they get **easily fatigued**. Compared to neurotypical employees, they get easily tired. One co-worker pointed out, "*Compared to others, they get easily tired. She gets sleepy and breathes faster.*" However, one participant disagreed and said that his concern is the **hyperactivity** of his co-worker with ASD. She shared:

"Mine is the opposite. He is always full of energy. He talks a lot too. You can ask him to bring something to any unit and he will run. When he gets back he will continue talking." (Although this is not really considered a big challenge. At times, it can even be an advantage."

Although not shared by many participants, it was also mentioned that **diet restrictions** of the employee with ASD are also a concern as explained by a colleague:

"Some employees fight sleepiness by drinking coffee while working. She cannot because sugar can make her hyperactive. Sometimes she could be very sleepy and it slows her down. We cannot even invite her to have a coffee break with us and that limits our interaction with her."

Benefits in PWD Accommodation in the Workplace

Even if co-workers find it challenging to work with their colleagues with ASD because of their limitations, it cannot be denied that having them on their team benefited their productivity. Generally, participants have positive perceptions regarding the productivity of employees with ASD. **Increased productivity** is the common answer of the participants when asked about the effect of having a co-worker with ASD. Since they do the other tasks that other employees tend to avoid, the tasks become lighter and they are able to focus on their main roles. They do not have to worry about tasks that are menial but necessary.

Many believe that the efficiency of their colleagues with ASD is at par with others, especially when the task given to them matches their skill, such as encoding data. In fact, there are tasks where they **outperform co-workers**. Excelling in routine tasks that are usually avoided by others is also not an uncommon observation from co-workers and this was verified by one of them who said, "*They are willing to take tasks that are not usually enjoyed by other employees... and they excel on it! For example, I will not last long in encoding data.*" Another co-worker added that she even admires the work of his colleague with ASD. They are **highly conscientious** with the tasks assigned to them. She reported, "*He is very careful with his work. He doesn't want to make errors and when he makes errors, he is even sadder than us when we make mistakes.*"

The presence of PWAs in the office makes the workplace **congenial**. The participants reported that **relationships** in the office generally improved. There is **increased sensitivity** among employees. Below are some testimonies from participants:

"We became more cautious when talking to them. We think first before we say or do anything so that we will not hurt their feelings. Those who tease him for fun also stopped. In effect, we also became more careful when making comments to other people."

"We become more sensitive with each other because she is sensitive to us. When I say I am not pretty she will say that everyone is pretty. If I look tired she will offer a massage. Even with other teams, we became more sensitive when we interacted with them...we were able to practice sensitivity because she is with us."

Aside from being more sensitive, there is also **increased understanding**. Initially, some behaviors

of employees with ASD are distracting to other employees. However, the more they get to know them, they become more aware that these behaviors are part of the limitations of individuals with ASD. One participant shared:

“He has mannerisms that are distracting. He will suddenly murmur or verbalize something. He has a laugh that is quite irritating. But you just try to understand him because of this condition.”

One respondent even said that her colleague with ASD’s transparency and lack of filtering could be helpful because you do not have to guess what he thinks or feels. She mentioned, “*She is very transparent. She will tell you her ideas directly and how she feels. Other people will say something but mean another thing.*”

Case 2: ATT

ATT is a multinational company that is based in the US. The company operates in the Philippines and employs around 300 people. They provide technical solutions to their clients, specifically in the process of repairing or replacing damaged devices. They also help their clients set up and use new technologies effectively. The company aims to provide customers with technology protection and troubleshooting services in order to have a good experience with technology. They create technology to help customers solve even the most mundane issues related to technology.

The company values inclusion and diversity in the workplace. The manufacturing plant in the Philippines employs people with autism and hearing loss.

Participants’ profile

All the three PWAs that participated in the study worked in the production area of ATT. ATT is the first company that employed the three participants, so they welcome the opportunity to engage in productive work. Two of them are relatively outgoing and look forward to interacting with co-workers.

Each participant has a unique personality. Kiko is the most reliable and focused among the three. He is serious in performing his tasks and very flexible. He can meet the target set by the company and his performance is comparable with neurotypical workers. He speaks well and tends to talk a lot to people he likes during break times. However, he does not enjoy attending social events like the other PWAs such

as company gatherings. Kiko is given critical tasks because of his ability to handle them.

Susan is very enthusiastic about working but struggles to focus on the job because of the tendency to get distracted by mechanical things in the workplace. Herbert does not show typical signs of autism compared to his companions but gets easily tired and loses focus on his work. He is obedient to his supervisor and cooperative. He easily got irritated and was described by the supervisor as playful.

Performance Shaping Factors

Just like neurotypical employees, the performance of PWA employees is evaluated based on their output. The PWAs were observed while working for three days at the production area to get a glimpse of their working habits and level of engagement. Observations showed that they are occupied doing their assigned tasks more than 90% of the time and coordinated well with their fellow workers.

Task

The supervisor interviewed thinks that the most important step in employing PWAs is **matching** their skills with tasks that they can accomplish without having risks. The three participants were assigned to do simple assembly, labelling, cleaning, and packing that are mechanical, repetitive, and comfortable given their strengths and limitations.

The supervisor explained, “*We assess their skills and identify the tasks and processes where they can use their skills.*” Additionally, they **continuously provide technical training** for their employees because systems and processes change quickly in the technology industry. However, recognizing that PWAs have difficulty in making big adjustments, they ensure that they will be assigned to a new task that is like their previous one. The supervisor stated,

“Regular training is needed. Our nature of business (technology) changes quickly. The company should always be ready for a transition. Our employees are reassigned to other tasks. For the PWAs, we make sure to train them and give them tasks that are close to their previous one so that the adjustment is not too difficult.”

Furthermore, when PWAs are assigned to a new task, they implement a Buddy System. The Buddy is responsible for monitoring and guiding his or her PWA co-worker until the need for supervision becomes minimal. The supervisor added, “*We have a Buddy*

System when there is a new process. The task of the Buddy is to shadow. Eventually supervision becomes less when they become familiar with the process and the environment.”

Organization and management

Prior to actual employment, all employees were given training on company rules and regulations. All the PWA employees are under one main supervisor who is very understanding and compassionate. He attributes this to a psychoeducation training he attended. The knowledge allowed him to identify appropriate tasks given the limitations of PWAs. According to him, *“without that orientation, I would not know how to communicate and deal with them properly especially during meltdowns.”*

To increase awareness among the employees and to equip them with knowledge on how to approach individuals with ASD, ATT regularly invites specialists to conduct seminars. These seminars are also beneficial to employees with children with autism. One of the employees mentioned, *“The departments conducted awareness seminars from experts (psychoeducation) especially on how to deal with them in terms of personalities and their behaviors and how to approach them. Our supervisors provide do’s and don’ts when they hire ASDs.”*

The supervisor treats them like other employees and reprimands them if necessary. When some of them are not focused on their tasks, the supervisor is quick to remind them of company targets and proper behavior at work. He takes responsibility for the output of all his workers which includes the three PWAs. Thus, after one year on the job, he was able to see significant difference in their work attitude. They have become more responsible and engaged in their work

Inclusion and accommodation are important to successfully integrate PWAs in the workplace. The COVID-19 pandemic made working conditions more challenging for the company, but they made sure that their PWA employees are included in adjustments made during the pandemic. The supervisor explained, *“Because of the pandemic, we are developing a special accommodation system. We provide transportation and assign them to tasks that require less interaction. We are still working on the other details.”* Aside from this, they also include the PWAs during recognition ceremonies. The supervisor added, *“We include them in company events. We also recognize them for*

their achievements like perfect attendance.” Such accommodations motivate them to improve their performance and look forward to each working day.

Organizational Culture

The organizational culture of ATT is highly performance oriented as can be seen in Table 2. This dimension is related to results orientation, expectations for performance, organization, and job enthusiasm. This perception of employees was brought about by the company’s work methods that were adapted from the mother company in the US and the practice of measuring output.

Table 2. Mean and Standard Deviation of the Organizational Culture Scores of ATT

Dimension	Mean	SD
Performance Orientation	4.39	0.51
Competitiveness Culture	4.34	0.75
Emphasis on Rewards Culture	4.34	0.67
Supportive Culture	4.33	0.54
Social Responsibility Culture	4.31	0.61
Stability Culture	4.28	0.53
Innovation Culture	4.19	0.68

Interestingly, ATT has almost the same score as SSD in the competitiveness culture dimension. Providing quality service is ATT’s strategy to keep their competitive advantage as a technology company. They provide repair services to US clients and competes with other companies worldwide. As such, they must promote a quality culture that will support their goals.

Garnering the same score as the competitiveness dimension is the emphasis on rewards. This dimension focused on providing opportunities for professional growth, being fair, giving high pay on a good performance, and giving praise. Since ATT has a mother company in the US, employees perceive that there are more opportunities for professional growth and the company can provide rewards in terms of high salary for good performance. Employees are aware of the company’s business and the possibility of career growth because of the increasing market demand for repair services abroad.

The mean scores for supportive culture and social responsibility culture are very close to the first three

dimensions of culture measured. ATT is a company that supports diversity and inclusion, and this is communicated to the employees. They do not only employ PWAs but also people with different disabilities.

The organizational culture of ATT promotes good performance while considering people's differences and limitations. This culture encourages the PWAs to improve their performance through constant reinforcement. Supervisors and co-workers were made aware of their unique characteristics, and appropriate support was given to them. They were not treated differently and the whole organization works together to make them feel at ease while on the job. They are considered part of the team so their performance should comply with established standards. The PWA employees, therefore, are given assignments that are appropriate to them and their outputs are monitored just like any member of the team.

Challenges in PWD Accommodation in the Workplace

In ATT Technologies, the most evident challenge of hiring employees with ASD is the **lack of technical skill**, making it difficult for the company to assign them with a variety of tasks because of the limited **skill set**. They are usually assigned to non-critical jobs to avoid the risks of committing errors. According to their supervisor, *"The tasks that can be assigned to them are limited to non-critical jobs only such as labelling and removal of labels. They cannot be given tasks that involve transactions"*.

Aside from their limited technical skills, their underdeveloped **cognitive skills** are also a challenge. Their **lack of focus** makes it challenging for supervisors to give them a series of instructions. Instructions should be given one at a time to avoid mistakes. The supervisor explained,

"They need to focus. For other employees, we can give them several instructions. For them, we need to give instructions one at a time. They need to finish the task first before we can give the next instruction. You cannot give multiple instructions because they will be confused."

Additionally, even if you give them a single instruction, it requires several repetitions. One of the co-workers commented, *"Sometimes, it requires a long explanation for them to understand the instruction. They tend to ask you to repeat the instruction several times. But it is tolerable. It is not really annoying."*

Another limitation is their job **flexibility**. They easily get pressured and stressed. One of the participants said, *"You cannot pressure them to work fast. They get stressed and sometimes they cry."* Furthermore, they also have difficulty tolerating changes like shifts in schedule.

Benefits in PWD Accommodation in the Workplace

In this company, **productivity** among PWAs is not an issue. When asked if they are willing to hire more PWAs, the supervisor said she is since she sees some benefits from having them in the team. First, their **quality of work is comparable to non-PWAs**. She said, *"They can perform well in non-critical jobs like placing barcodes and the quality is comparable to the level of performance of their counterparts."* Moreover, their attendance record is also commendable.

Having PWAs around makes the workplace more **congenial**. Working with PWAs improves **the working environment**. For co-workers, they are a **source of joy** during stressful times. A co-worker expressed, *"They lower our stress. They entertain us. They are like ice breakers. They randomly sing and dance. They are always happy, and their happiness is contagious. They are fun to be with."* They are also examples of how to deal with conflicts with co-workers because they have the ability to resolve misunderstandings. According to a participant, *"When they have quarrels, they easily patch things up. Unlike other employees who hold grudges against other co-workers."*

Having PWAs around the office also brought **awareness** to the employees. Working with them on a daily basis made them more patient and understanding. The seminars conducted to educate the entire company were also helpful to employees with children with autism. According to the supervisor, *"Our employees become more aware of autism because of their interaction with them, and some of our employees benefit from the seminars about autism because they have children with ASD."*

The co-workers also expressed that their **communications skills improved**, specifically their ability to speak in English since all their PWA co-workers are English speaking. They are forced to speak in English when they converse with them every day.

Framework for Integrating PWA in the Workplace

Recognizing the benefits and challenges of employing PWAs, we propose a framework that employers can use to understand the factors affecting their performance and limitations. Persons with disabilities are generally undervalued by employers because of the limited understanding of the disability and their potential. Organizations that consider employing PWAs can use the framework to understand the nature of their disability and identify organizational initiatives that can enhance their productivity and overall performance.

PWA Employee Attributes

PWA employees can be better understood by being cognizant of their uniqueness in terms of four employment requisites: cognitive skills, social skills, technical skills, and health as shown in Figure 1.

The most salient attribute of PWA employees is their cognitive skills. At work, being able to concentrate and focus on their task is a challenge. They have the tendency to be distracted by the environment and this affects their performance. For them to focus well, instructions should be given one at a time. It might be difficult for them to process several pieces of information and execute multiple tasks. PWAs also prefer routine tasks since flexibility is also one of their limitations. It is difficult for them to mentally shift from one task to another. They may not have the resilience to withstand the pressure of doing a variety of work, and this is when they begin to manifest undesired behaviors such as crying and temper outbursts. However, if the task matches their skill, they can hyper focus and work efficiently.

Another observable attribute of PWA employees is their deviant social skills. It is difficult for them to discern proper etiquette and observe boundaries when interacting with other people. PWAs could be very affectionate towards others. However, at times, they encroach on their co-workers' personal space or ask personal questions. Because of their difficulty in filtering their words and actions, some of their co-workers find them hard to deal with. Their honesty and frankness may easily offend others, and their extreme affection makes them uncomfortable. Educating the co-workers about their condition is needed to increase their patience, understanding, and appreciation for the PWA employee.

Related to social skills are their technical skills. Clear communication is a basic element in working as a team. PWAs sometimes find it hard to give and take instructions. Supervisors need to be patient in giving clear and sometimes repetitive instructions. For PWAs with limited vocabulary and the ability to verbally communicate their thoughts, co-workers need to be extra patient in comprehending them. Compared to their co-workers, PWAs have fewer skill sets. The variety of tasks that can be given to them is limited. Usually, non-critical tasks or tasks that have minimal consequences when done incorrectly are assigned to them. Mostly, it is in these tasks that PWAs perform well, sometimes even better than their counterparts.

Compliance with their health requirements is also a factor to consider when integrating PWAs in the company. Co-workers must be aware of the dietary restrictions of their PWA employees. Food with high sugar content may cause them to be hyperactive and lose focus and manifest behaviors that may distract others and affect the team's productivity.



Figure 1. *PWA Employee Attributes*

Facets of PWA Employee Performance

Antecedents of employee performance have been tackled in management literature but only Zhu (2018) investigated job self-efficacy in relation to PWD performance. High workplace inclusion defined as perceptions of being included can minimize the negative effects of disability. Diamantidis and Chatzoglou (2018) recently proposed a model that incorporated management support, organizational climate, job environment, adaptability, and intrinsic motivation to the performance of neurotypical employees, which

are similar to our framework. Hendricks (2010) also discussed the challenges and success factors for employing PWAs. Our framework, illustrated in Figure 2, explains the role of job, organizational and environmental factors on the capabilities of PWAs.

Proper identification of the **task** is a crucial driver of PWA employee performance. Providing a structured job supports the need of PWAs for repetitive and routine tasks. Given these conditions, they exhibit a high level of accuracy and efficiency (Dreaver et al., 2020). The ability of PWAs to engage in repetitive tasks is highly valued in the companies visited. Some tasks do not fit neurotypical employees because they are either below their skill level or not stimulating enough, but PWA employees delight in doing them because they are structured and easy to follow. These tasks do not require complicated decision-making, which can cause confusion and stress. It has been documented that PWAs stay longer in a company if their skill and personality were carefully matched to the task (Hayward, McVilly, & Stokes, 2019). Some companies modify the job to better suit PWA employees (Hagner & Cooney, 2005). Thus, they perform well and take pride in their jobs.

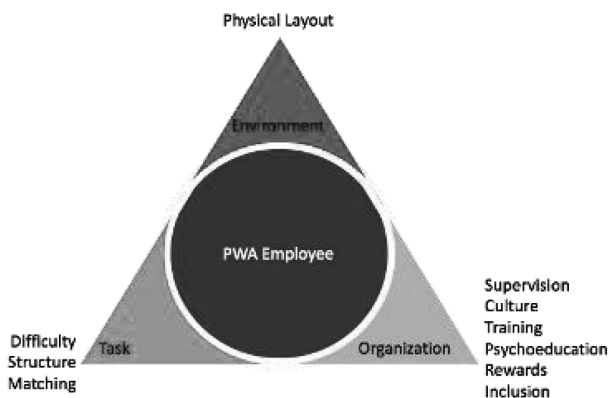


Figure 2. Framework for Understanding PWA Employee Performance

The effect of the physical environment on PWA has been documented in studies involving school children and employees (Hayward et al., 2019; Krieger et al., 2018). Workplace accommodations involving the physical environment showed a positive effect on the productivity of PWA employees (Baldwin, Costley, & Warren, 2014). PWAs are usually distracted by noise, bright lights, crowded spaces, and darkness

(Hendricks, 2010; Krieger et al., 2018). Some PWAs want to be isolated from others because they are not comfortable with social interaction. However, this was not observed in our case studies as all of them showed interest in interacting with co-workers. Our case study was not able to document serious sensitivity to noise. Distraction was brought about by visitors or employees from other departments during working hours and the inability of the office layout to isolate workers from passers-by. Thus, we think that the office layout and the placement of the PWA within this layout is an important determinant of performance. The supervisor can identify the best location for the PWA based on the situation.

Supervisors influence the performance of PWAs through their communication and management strategies (Hagner & Cooney, 2005). They sometimes act as second parents of the employees and teach them the right decorum in the workplace. Providing clear and specific instructions was identified as good practice when interacting with PWAs (Hagner & Cooney, 2005). The supervisor's willingness to provide accommodations helps optimize the performance of the employee. When a certain task was not performed well, the supervisor can give alternative tasks that can better suit the talent of the employee. Thus, the supervision of PWA may not be for everyone. The company should find suitable supervisors that are patient, tolerant and willing mentors. Leaders with **coaching and supervision skills** have a strong impact on inclusion in the organization (Seitz & Smith, 2016). Rewarding positive behavior can be used by supervisors to improve the performance of PWAs (Jones, Webb, Estes, & Dawson, 2013)

The two companies scored high in the competitive culture dimension. This type of culture promotes quality of performance and achievement of targets. Companies in the Philippines are reluctant to employ PWAs because of the perception of low contribution to the organization (Gan et al., 2018). However, with a competitive culture in place, the PWAs are provided the opportunity to work well in the organization. ATT does not allow the challenges of working with PWAs are addressed immediately so as not to hamper their work. In NSD, quality of work is a shared responsibility by participants, so they must work as a team and bring the performance of the PWA to an acceptable level. Both companies employed good task matching to address potential performance problems. Feedback

was immediate as part of the coaching and supervision of PWAs.

The competitiveness culture also cultivates achievement orientation. Co-workers observed that PWAs are not given special treatment by the supervisors. They are expected to finish their assignments on time, just like their neurotypical counterparts. Such practice gives them both pressure and confidence in their ability to perform the assigned tasks. This allows the PWAs to feel dignity in their employment and eradicate the perception of employment for charity.

Employee training is a part of the onboarding procedures of many companies. Even experienced employees need to learn the nuances of a job because of differences in culture and environment. In the case of PWAs, especially those that will be employed for the first time, training is a means of preparing them for the job, clarifying expectations, and building up skills. Pencene and Svyantek (2016) highlighted the importance of training them to address social skills deficits. PWAs that received adequate training on a specific skill showed an increase in performance, especially formal training obtained from educational institutions (Burke, Andersen, Bowen, Howard, & Allen, 2010; Hendricks, 2010). Hayward et al. (2018) reported that the occupational longevity of a PWA is influenced by the company's effort to impart new skills.

An important step in preparing organizations to accept PWAs is providing psychoeducation to the entire workforce. Psychoeducation comprises systemic, didactic psychotherapeutic interventions, which are adequate for informing patients and their relatives about the illness and its treatment, facilitating both an understanding and personally responsible handling of the illness and supporting those afflicted in coping with the disorder (Bhattacharjee et al., 2011). Registered psychologists in the clinical, developmental, and industrial fields can jointly develop psychoeducation modules that can promote inclusion in an organization (Javier et al., 2014). Aside from a general discussion on the nature of the disability or mental health condition, psychoeducation programs should also include explanations on why and how accommodations are given to these employees. Accommodation is often perceived as unfair and viewed as "special" treatment, and if not justified to other employees, jealousy and resentment may become a common reaction in the workplace (Akabas & Kurzman, 2005). Adjunct to face-to-face psychoeducation programs, reading

materials can also be printed and distributed to all employees or uploaded to the organization's website.

Human Resources takes the lead in making the workplace more accepting of employees with conditions through its five-fold function: recruitment and selection, training and development, compensation and benefits, employee engagement, and research. Policies and programs should be reviewed to include the rights of the PWDs and the architectural structure and facilities should be safe and friendly to all types of employees (Javier et al., 2014).

Since PWAs have unique traits and characteristics, psychoeducation training should also be provided to their co-workers, especially those that will be working with them directly. This is step towards creating an inclusive environment where PWAs can be comfortable (Hagner & Cooney, 2005). Co-workers' training prepares them to support PWAs in the workplace and deal with them appropriately. Case studies involving PWAs showed that autism awareness training is necessary for successful integration (Bolman, 2008)

Conclusion

Successfully integrating PWAs in the workplace requires effort but can be beneficial to the organization. Dealing with the cognitive, social, technical, and health limitations of PWAs and providing them proper tasks, a conducive environment, and a fostering organization will be a monumental undertaking for the company but in the end, this will be outweighed by the benefits of having them in the workplace. In some tasks that are routinary and non-critical, PWAs can even outperform their counterparts. PWAs could also have intangible and unmeasurable contributions. They pave the way for other employees to gain more awareness, understanding, and sensitivity towards other people in general and these benefits help develop a better organizational culture. With proper support from the company, PWAs can be a productive part of their workforce.

Our framework is limited to companies that employ PWAs. There are only two companies that participated in the study; thus, there can also be other factors that might have been overlooked. The participation of more companies in various industries is needed to validate the contents of the framework. Despite this limitation, the authors believe that the proposed framework for integrating persons with Autism in the workforce is a

viable framework that can be used by most companies that intend to hire PWAs.

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Appendix A. Organizational Culture Survey

Organization Culture:

Please place a check mark on the box that reflects your perceptions towards the following statements about your company:

1 – Not at all 2 – Minimally 3 – Moderately 4 – Considerably 5 – Very Much

Questions	5	4	3	2	1
1. To what extent is your organization recognized for its adaptability?					
2. To what extent is your organization recognized for its emphasis on quality?					
3. To what extent is your organization recognized for its being innovative?					
4. To what extent is your organization recognized for providing security of employment?					
5. To what extent is your organization recognized for its being competitive?					
6. To what extent is your organization recognized for having a good reputation?					
7. To what extent is your organization recognized for providing opportunities for professional growth?					
8. To what extent is your organization recognized for its being results oriented?					
9. To what extent is your organization recognized for its being socially responsible?					
10. To what extent is your organization recognized for being distinctive?					
11. To what extent is your organization recognized for sharing information freely?					
12. To what extent is your organization recognized for its being quick to take advantage of opportunities?					
13. To what extent is your organization recognized for risk taking?					
14. To what extent is your organization recognized for its being fair?					
15. To what extent is your organization recognized for having high expectations for performance?					
16. To what extent is your organization recognized for its stability?					
17. To what extent is your organization recognized for its being highly organized?					
18. To what extent is your organization recognized for giving high pay on good performance?					

19. To what extent is your organization recognized for its being achievement oriented?
 20. To what extent is your organization recognized for its being reflective?
 21. To what extent is your organization recognized for having a clear guiding philosophy?
 22. To what extent is your organization recognized for its being team oriented?
 23. To what extent is your organization recognized for encouraging individual responsibility?
 24. To what extent is your organization recognized for its being calm?
 25. To what extent is your organization recognized for its being people oriented?
 26. To what extent is your organization recognized for its enthusiasm for the job?
 27. To what extent is your organization recognized for its low conflicts?
 28. To what extent is your organization recognized for its being collaborative?
 29. To what extent is your organization recognized for its giving praise for good performance?
-