



## **Difference makers: neurodivergent talent embraced at Pru**

An update on the company’s work with people with autism and other cognitive differences.

By Kara Corridan

Susan Unvarsky knows exactly what sparked her aspiration to help bring more neurodivergent talent to Prudential.

Nearly five years ago, when she was the chief operating officer in Retirement Strategies, Unvarsky had a colleague who has a son with autism. He was turning 18 and aging out of the support services provided to him. Unvarsky saw firsthand the challenges this posed for his family, and came to understand how difficult it can be for those who are neurodivergent to find meaningful employment. (*Neurodivergent* is a term that evolved from *neurodiverse* to describe the natural variances in our brains that harness a different way of thinking, communicating and socializing.)

Now chief claims officer at Enabling Solutions, Unvarsky is working to help more people like her colleague’s son find meaningful jobs. “My team has always been a big supporter of ADAPT,” she explains, referring to the business resource group for employees with disabilities and their allies. “And we have hired people with different types of disabilities. But I wanted to go beyond that. I challenged us to come up with a plan to identify highly skilled neurodivergent individuals who could succeed in our environment.”

“They are a significantly underrepresented group within the workforce today,” confirms Roger Putnam, head of U.S. Customer Service, Enabling Solutions. Putnam sits on the board of the National Organization on Disability, a nonprofit that aims to increase employment opportunities for Americans with disabilities. While 35% of 18-year-olds with autism attend college, 85% of college graduates with autism are unemployed or underemployed, according to Integrate Autism Employment Advisors, known as Integrate.

### **An ‘incredibly successful’ program**

Since 2020, Unvasky's team has worked with Integrate and similar organizations to bring in more than 30 neurodivergent individuals, including college interns, to work in frontline roles such as disbursement processors, retirement specialists and claims examiners. "We're proud of how the program has evolved and how incredibly successful our team has been. This has been a passion for us," says Unvasky.

Integrate also trains managers to ensure that onboarding and day-to-day interaction is as smooth as possible. What's more, the organization holds optional training sessions for the rest of the team. "The vast majority sign up for the training. Our frontline leaders and team members are determined to make this program work," notes Unvasky.

That education has been invaluable to help support neurodivergent colleagues. For instance, there are unspoken norms that guide social settings and they aren't always obvious to someone on the autism spectrum. "We worked hard to help our neurodivergent talent better navigate things like when and how long to speak up in a meeting," Unvasky explains.

One way neurodivergent workers are not different from their neurotypical colleagues: training time. They tend to train in the same amount of time — and in some cases, faster, says Unvasky. One member of her team, hired a year ago, is a top producer.

### **PGIM's program launches careers in data science and beyond**

PGIM is also celebrating cognitive diversity. Last October, the global asset management business kicked off a six-month pilot program in partnership with Neurodiversity in the Workplace, a business consultancy that connects highly qualified neurodivergent talent with employers. The program is a first step in building out a comprehensive program that will be responsible for hiring and developing neurodiverse talent at PGIM.

The executive sponsor of PGIM's program, Chief Operations and Innovation Officer Roben Dunkin, has her own personal connection to the initiative. "Growing up, my mother was a teacher at a school for children on the autism spectrum," she says. "Meeting the children my mom worked with and seeing how she related to students on various parts of the spectrum was eye-opening for me. From my mom, I learned that having patience and really trying to understand the different ways people communicate with each other is how you can bring out the best in people."

The first cohort of six individuals were selected by PGIM businesses to work on assignments related to data science. They worked on high-impact projects in robotics, data migration and reporting in Tableau, automation, coding, and more. The goal of the pilot program is to develop the right framework to convert participants to full-time hires and provide the opportunity for participants to develop additional skills that are transferable to other positions.

"The best part of the experience has been working in a supportive environment that accepts me and allows me to reach my full potential," says Ben Sulc, a program participant who worked with PGIM Fixed Income on automation and AI projects. "It helped me not only gain experience — it gave me a sense of the kind of workplace culture I want to be a part of. The interview process was different from the traditional process. My skills were being evaluated rather than my ability to be a good interviewee. I had struggled in traditional interviews, but felt that I excelled in this process since the focus was how well I could perform at the job."

To celebrate Autism Acceptance Month, PGIM has partnered with Zenaviv to showcase the artwork of neurodivergent artists in the lobby of Prudential Tower in Newark, New Jersey. Zenaviv aims to harness the power of art from around the world to uplift the lives of neurodivergent artists through opportunities, recognition and income, a mission closely aligned with that of Prudential and PGIM.

"There's a real shared spirit among senior leaders across the company who have committed to these efforts," says Erin Evans, a director in PGIM's Human Resources team, who has long been involved in Prudential and PGIM's neurodivergent talent initiatives. "Everyone is putting in the work to have hiring practices or management styles that consider the valuable perspectives and skills offered by our neurodivergent colleagues."

And that work is not common in the corporate world. "This is a real differentiator for us," says Putnam.

National Organization on Disability president Carol Glazer agrees: “Prudential’s efforts to engage with and hire neurodiverse employees are truly unique. We’re proud to partner with Prudential on our mission to increase employment opportunities for Americans living with disabilities.”