

Why Autism Employment Makes Business Sense for Agriculture

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NOTE: On March 3, 2011, Heather Davis gave the keynote address at the Autism Works National Conference in St. Louis, MO. Most of the information below was covered in her presentation. Because that presentation was the first public description of the TIAA-CREF Fruits of Employment project, Autism Works staff withheld this article until after the conference.

The next revolution in autism employment may come from an apple orchard run by a major investment company. Not surprising, the parent of a child with autism is at the center of it.

TIAA-CREF is one of the largest financial services companies in the United States, with \$430 billion in assets under its management. It was originally established as the Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association in 1918, and it survived the 1929 stock market crash and the Great Depression. Today, it is the largest manager of employer-sponsored 403(b) tax-sheltered annuity plans in the U.S. and serves 3.7 million active and retired employees at more than 15,000 institutions.



Today, Heather Davis is Senior Managing Director at TIAA-CREF and head of its Global Private Markets division. But in 2007, Davis was a portfolio manager and was part of a team which proposed the company diversify its investments by purchasing farms. This is not a common investment approach, but Davis says it makes sense in today's world:



Heather Davis

"You have growing populations in China and India, and growing middle classes that want to eat meat protein. It takes 5 to 7 pounds of grain to make a pound of meat.

If you own grain land in the grain producing countries of the world, you're probably going to make money over the next century."

Since 2007, TIAA-CREF has purchased more than 500,000 acres of "agricultural properties" in the U.S., Australia, Brazil and Central and Eastern Europe, but most of its agricultural investments are U.S. farms. "We produce corn and soybeans on most of them," Davis says, "But we also grow

almonds, pistachios, wine grapes, apples, and other types of commercial crops." These "low risk, long term growth" assets help diversify the overall TIAA-CREF investment portfolio.

As an institutional investor, TIAA-CREF is not interested in actually RUNNING wheat farms and apple orchards. So it hires agricultural management companies to handle the day-to-day operations while its agricultural investment specialists, like Davis, monitor general business and policy issues.



One of the earliest purchases for the agricultural portfolio included an apple orchard in the Badger Mountain area of central Washington State. Badger Mountain is part of a rural, rich agricultural area on the Columbia River, which specializes in wheat, apples, and cattle production. Farmers in the area have traditionally used a variety of labor sources to operate the farms, including a large contingent of seasonal, non-local workers.

By 2008, Davis grew a little concerned about some aspects of these traditional labor sources. There was high turnover in staffing, occasional issues with timeliness and absences, and growing regulatory issues. Where, she wondered, could they find a new, significant, stable source of employees?

Davis recalled that, soon after her son had been diagnosed with autism several years earlier, her ex-husband had attended a presentation on autism by Jaquelyn McCandless, M.D. During that presentation, McCandless had speculated about the possibility of adults with autism finding work in agriculture. To McCandless, the regular routine, reduced social interaction, and repetitive tasks all seemed like a good fit but she had no specific examples.

As a parent, Davis was very aware of the growing number of people with an autism diagnosis in the U.S. She wondered if this might be a productive workforce for agricultural properties like Badger Mountain. But whom could she consult for advice?

While reading a newsletter from Cornell University, where she got her undergraduate degree and MBA, Davis learned that Temple Grandin would be speaking there soon. "So I called up there and talked to somebody who was coordinating her schedule, and I got on her calendar. I flew to Ithaca and had breakfast with her. I told her about the program and told her what I wanted to do. I got her advice." Grandin thought it was a great idea, and had many specific suggestions: for example, not to include housing in the project. In the years since, Grandin has continued as an informal advisor on the project.

Davis also visited various autism and disability projects around the country, including an autism-specific farmstead in Ohio called Bittersweet Farm. But none of the facilities she visited had experience doing what she planned - insert adults with autism into the established workforce of a successful agricultural business.

Although she was still researching the idea, she soon felt it was time to formally present the project to her investment committee for formal approval. Davis laughs as she remembers how that meeting went: "You can imagine what investment committees are like – a group of people sitting around and listening to people talk about investments and why they want to do them. And here I come with, 'I

want to take these farms that we have and I want to run them with an autistic workforce.' You could have heard a pin drop in the room. It was the longest time I'd ever heard that room be completely quiet."

In the end, the committee decided to approve her plan, now called Fruits of Employment, as part of their social investing activities. With that approval, she began looking more seriously for an autism employment consultant.



James Emmett

Soon after, she found James Emmett.

Emmett had been instrumental in developing the employment model and supports for the innovative Walgreens' autism employment project in Anderson, South Carolina, in 2005. Following that, he worked with several other companies on similar autism and disability employment outreach efforts – a model he calls Corporate Development. When TIAA-CREF contacted him, Emmett has just accepted a position as Director of HR Connect, a disability employment planning and consultation program for businesses, hosted by APSE (formerly the Association for Persons in Supported Employment).

Emmett was very interested when he heard about Davis' idea. He traveled to TIAA-CREF headquarter in North Carolina to meet with Davis and Jose Minaya, who works with her on the portfolio. "They laid out their dream and vision," Emmett says, "And I told them what was practical and what wasn't, and what I thought could be realistically done."

One area of concern for Emmett was the level of inclusion. Davis and Minaya were considering two options: a fully inclusive model in which people with autism would work within established work teams throughout the orchard, and a more segregated model in which people with autism would work in separate teams and only on specific parts of the orchard, and mix very little with the established work force. Emmett was clear on his opinion:

"I told them, if they were interested in going into segregated farms and housing, that was not me. But if they wanted to shoot toward inclusive employment, that would be me. And that's the direction they chose to go."

Soon Emmett was making regular visits to Badger Mountain and working with the on-site staff in Washington State. Davis says the project never would have worked without Emmett's contributions: "We didn't know any of this stuff. He knew how to do it, he's done it before. He knew who we should talk to, who we shouldn't talk to. He helped us find the folks (potential employees with autism), he helped us find somebody to work on the farm with them. He set up the program, the assists. We did job fairs, we did all kinds of stuff. It was all James. He told us what to do, we did it. We showed up, he told us what to say, we said it. And off we went."

In the first year of the project, they hired 45 individuals with autism to work in the orchards, although Emmett adds that many were in seasonal jobs or were students working for job experience. Even so, that represented approximately 20% of the peak seasonal staff at Badger Mountain. As of early 2011, of the 50 – 60 year-round staff at Badger Mountain orchards, 20% are people with

autism or similar disabilities. They do the same jobs as other workers, receiving the same pay and holding the same status.



In 2010, TIAA-CREF purchased another farm - the 4,300 acre White Hills Vineyard in Santa Barbara County on the pacific coast of southern California. By then, the Badger Mountain site was yielding some good lessons on agricultural employment of people with autism. So the Fruits of Employment project was extended to White Hills almost immediately. The White Hills autism employment effort is still small – an initial group of 10 individuals as of early 2011 - but so far it is going well. Davis says this kind of employment outreach makes good business sense:

White Hills Vineyards

"If you have 500 acres of wine grapes to prune (for example), I would argue that an autistic person might be among the very best candidates for that job."

Panda Hershey is Permanent Crops Portfolio Manager for TIAA-CREF and is closely involved with the day to day operations of the Fruits of Employment project at White Hills and Badger Mountain. She echoes Davis' comments: "It offers a lot of comfort to those families, to know that there is a place for them to be fulfilled and contribute to society. On the other side of that, it's also great for my property. So it's a win-win situation. And I'm just really proud to keep moving the project along."



Panda Hershey

Emmett describes a specific example of the benefits of workers with autism: a young man we will call Nick, who has autism, was overwhelmed when he first arrived to work at the Badger Mountain site. Emmett recalls "He looked down the rows and saw the enormity of the orchards, and it was overwhelming for him. There were not a lot of clear beginnings and ends to tasks, it seemed like the rows went on forever. I didn't think he was going to be a great match."

It was three months before Emmett was back on-site to see how the various new employees were doing. In that time, Nick had turned into one of the best workers in the entire orchard. He had learned to manage his initial anxiety by taking a step back from each tree before working on it, visualizing the task, and setting visual, concrete boundaries for himself. And his ratings were excellent. All employees at Badger Mountain are monitored for both speed/productivity and for quality/completeness of their work. Nick's speed is about average for staff of Badger Mountain, but his scores on quality are amazing. For example, if he has a task of pruning trees, he will never have taken too many branches off or too few – always just enough.

The on-site managers soon transferred Nick from the orchard to tagging the bins of incoming, picked apples. It was his job to do an approximate count of how many apples each bin contained, tag each bin with that information, and do a quick quality check of the apples. This fit Nick's skills perfectly

and he excelled at the job. In addition, Nick was ALWAYS on time. One day Nick was five minutes late and was upset with himself the rest of the day. The manager told Emmett "I can't believe somebody cares so much about their job."

As for Nick, he told Emmett he loves the job. He explained that he likes being out in nature so much and getting good exercise (he has lost 20 pounds since starting work and looks, Emmett says, "Like a whole new person"). But Nick also liked the flexibility of his social interactions. "When he feels like he wants to socialize," Emmett explains, "He can take his lunch and have lunch with others. On other days, he can have lunch with the trees. Having the option calms him down."

Hershey, Davis, and Emmett all emphasize that the Fruits of Employment model is still far from complete. The biggest surprise, say Davis and Emmett, is how long it has taken to work out the many details.

"It's like families," Davis jokes, "You can't just go from point A to point B. There's a lot of stuff going on in between."



A worker at White Hills

But Emmett is quietly excited about how it is turning out. Of all the autism employment projects with which he has been involved, this one has some of the biggest implications because the agricultural industry is so large and because the jobs are distributed out in rural communities where integrated employment options for autism are often scarce. "I think there is a revolution going on here," he says, "When people eventually see our outcomes, and see what we have been able to accomplish, in terms of both how people with disabilities win and how the agricultural industry is going to win, it's going to be pretty impressive."

And the credit, Emmett says, goes to Davis and her employer – "It is important to emphasize the support level and the commitment of TIAA-CREF," he says.

Davis says that she is pleased with the entire project – both Fruits of Employment and the agricultural portfolio: "It's a wonderful business. Of all the things that I do - and I do a lot of other things - this is my favorite thing. By far."

James Emmett will give a presentation on *Autism – What Rehabilitation Professionals Need to Know* at the Autism Works National conference.

Details on the Autism Works National Conference are available at <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Autism-Works/136057253090452>

or at <http://dps.missouri.edu/Autism.html>.

The Autism Works National Conference is presented by:

