

# Calif. Company finds special value in autistic employees

**(CBS News) SANTA MONICA, Calif.** -- The most surprising thing about Max Parker's morning routine is that he has a job to go to -- at all.



Max Parker

## **CBS NEWS**

He didn't know a whole lot about it when he got into it. "It was pretty much all new stuff," he says.

But now, he seems to be excelling at it.

Parker is a software analyst. He's also autistic. Parker says that when he was growing up, he never envisioned having a job like this.

Roughly 75 percent of autistic adults are unemployed, in part because the brain disorder makes it difficult to interact with others. But many on the autism spectrum also have an uncanny ability to focus intensely on minute details -- perfect for the tedious work of hunting for glitches in computer software.



Chad Hahn

## **CBS NEWS**

"This is not a charity," says Chad Hahn, the CEO of MindSpark. "And our employees are good at what they do."

Hahn, a software designer, used to outsource work to India, but his wife, a social worker, convinced him “high-functioning” autistic adults, like Parker, are well suited for the job.

“If you and I look at a set of instructions over and over again, I don’t know about you, but I would miss some things,” Hahn says. “Max doesn’t miss things. He’s really good at it.”

“Finding jobs for people with autism that focus on technical skills, on concentration, on detail, is exactly the right thing to do,” says Dr. Marcel Just, who studies autism at Carnegie Mellon University.



Dr. Marcel Just

**CBS NEWS**

Just says his research has found autistic brains are wired differently. Most people rely on the front of the brain to process the “big picture” around us. But with autism, it’s the opposite: thinking is dominated by parts of the brain that handle details.

“People with autism can zoom in on detail, with technical knowledge, with expertise, and zoom in, not be bothered by the larger picture and maybe find details that are wrong,” Just says.

Max Parker is one of three autistic employees at MindSpark, and more are training in an on-site classroom.

“Think about how hard it’s been like for them all these years, where people have dismissed them and their abilities, and maybe overlooked what they could do or could be,” Hahn says. “They just needed a chance. They have abilities that are quite valuable. That should be unlocked somehow. And that’s all we’re trying to do here.”

Providing opportunity -- and a paycheck.