“Social entrepreneurship is about using the tools of capitalism to address some social inequality”.

An Associate Professor of Information Systems at ESADE, Jonathan Wareham has focussed his research work on the intersection of information technology, economics and strategy. He also teaches undergraduate and MBA Executive economics, computer programming and quantity surveying courses. Wareham spoke to us about the paper he has co-authored, entitled “Harnessing the Power of Autism Spectrum Disorder”.

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The article was co-authored by you and Thorkil Sonne. How did you come into contact with each other?
I met Thorkil through a mutual friend who was working as a COO at the time. She had left a management position at a large, well-established IT consultancy and took a job at a company (Specialisterne) that recruited people with autism to carry out software development and testing. When she first mentioned it, I thought "That's silly". But after a few days, I began to wonder, "What in the world is she talking about?" I began by visiting the company several times, and with each visit I became increasingly impressed and excited as I slowly began to appreciate the complexity and sophistication of what they were trying to do.

What working methodologies have you used in this case?
Traditional case study methods. Lots of time spent with the company. Lots of time speaking to consultants, managers and, most importantly, clients, as they are the ones who endorse the business model.

What is its target audience?
The parents of the roughly 1% of the world’s children (and adults) that suffer from some form of ASD are the immediate target audience. We are trying to tell them that an informed group of individuals exists that is ready to think differently about ASD, and that maybe the case will serve as an inspiration to those who champion the cause in their local community to reach out and learn to accept ASD as a difference – even a gift under the right conditions - and not only a disability. The secondary, and perhaps more important, audience is everyone else who feels they witness or are confronted with some form of natural or social injustice, or some other form of disability or socio-economic marginalisation. We want to show them a model of how you can take something that would be devastating to most “normal” people, and turn it into something positive for so many others.

What is the main contribution of the article?
Social entrepreneurship is about using the tools of capitalism to address some social inequality. Bill Gates called it “creative capitalism” at the last Davos World Economic Forum. But effectively, it means defining a business model, sustainable by its own financial logic, to improve the lives of those who are normally marginalised or disadvantaged for some reason. This idea is attractive because it distances itself from philanthropy, which is well-intended and important, but often collapses when funding disappears. The ideal of social entrepreneurship is that it defines a sustainable balance that continues in both good and bad economic times, and hence serves a purpose in the long run.

What we want to show our audience is an operational model, the triumphs and the difficulties. The fact is that most of us want to change the world for the better; many of us have bright ideas and good intentions. But, in reality, few have the emotional dedication and perseverance to risk their financial security to engage in a mass-level experiment. What Sonne did was so impressive because he had no model of how to do this. It took a considerable amount of hard work, trial and error, dissatisfied customers, unhappy employees and a frustrated family before he finally polished an operational model that worked.

Most of us would have gone home crying and given up after the third week. He persisted, and that is a huge difference. We know a great deal about good ideas and how we might like to make the world better. We know far less about how, though.
Harnessing the Power of Autism Spectrum Disorder

How to put ideas into a structure, format or delivery model that can be implemented in a manner that is required by companies guided by a calculus of cut-throat business. Specialisterne is a clever idea. But the enduring contribution is understanding how to refine an operational model, one that transformed Sonne’s idea into a serious service that will be demanded under the most competitive market conditions.

You work includes various quotes from specialists as well as examples. How did you choose them?
We chose quotes that embody the spirit of what Sonne is trying to do. Moreover, we selected quotes that expressed the feelings of the consultants that now work for Specialisterne. I didn’t know much about ASD before getting involved in this case. Most of us do not, and that is understandable. But the fact is that most people with ASD are not “off-the-charts” geniuses like those portrayed in Rain Man. Those types are very scarce statistically. Rather so, most people with ASD are just good people like you and I with average intelligence, who have some difficulties with social interaction. That is all. But unfortunately this is enough to keep them out of the labour market, which brings on the second-order problems related to isolation such as depression, substance abuse, etc. To a great extent, our quotes are aimed at giving a human, natural face to the Specialisterne consultants with ASD. They are warm, charismatic and intelligent people. We want to show that they think, worry and hope in the same way as you and I do.

From your point of view, will the Specialisterne business model be reproduced in the coming years?
Absolutely so. For ASD communities, the word is out and the demand is there. Everywhere Sonne goes he is greeted with a similar response: “Please help us do this here!” But there are also some underlying challenges inherent in his model that we try to highlight and generalise to all models of social entrepreneurship. Social entrepreneurship is a double-edged sword. It is attractive and appealing in times of economic prosperity. It will get you through the doors of prestigious companies and onto the pages of MIT Press, HBS Publishing, and even ESADE Knowledge Briefs. But it can also haunt you. In times of economic slowdown, there is always this lingering question of “Is this a real business?” “Are they really as good as the competitors?” In the article, we try and bring this dilemma to the surface and look at strategies for managing it. This, we hope, is the sustainable contribution of the article.