Tuesday June 18 is Autistic Pride Day and every April, thanks to National Autism Awareness Month, there’s a renewed sense of support for people living with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and those who’ve worked tirelessly to foster environments of inclusion and self-determination for all.

Yet, when Autism Awareness Month comes to an end, so too does much of the focus on autism from the general public. As a society, we’ve made positive strides, but it’s important to remember that the conversations about acceptance, inclusion and support for people with ASD need to happen year-round.

Today Autistic Pride Day is about celebrating differences in the autism community and realizing people’s infinite possibilities and potential. People with autism have hopes, dreams, aspirations, and a right to participate in the working world. Unfortunately,
people with ASD are not afforded the same opportunities as the rest of us when it comes to employment.

While the majority of Americans are enjoying a low unemployment rate and strong economy, the unemployment rate for adults with developmental disabilities remains high.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, only 29 percent of Americans ages 16 to 64 with a disability were employed as of June 2018, compared with nearly 75 percent of those without a disability. The unemployment rate for people with disabilities who are actively seeking work is 9.2 percent — more than twice as high as for those without a disability (4.2 percent).

Employers’ lack of understanding and lasting stigmas are partly to blame for this discrepancy. Due to preconceived notions, many employers remain skeptical when it comes to hiring people with autism or another developmental disability. They believe the diagnosis would hinder capabilities and productivity at work. Ultimately, this way of thinking means there’s a large pool of talent not being utilized.

The good news is that this national mindset is starting to change. Thanks to an ongoing effort to educate employers, more people with disabilities are being tapped for roles that match their abilities and skill sets. They’re also realizing that it’s not just good for morale, but it’s good for business too. According to a recent study, businesses that actively seek to employ people with disabilities outperform businesses that do not. The same study found that, on average, these same companies achieved 28 percent higher revenue, double the net income, and 30 percent higher economic profit margins over others in a four-year period.

Through the Employment Support Program at Bridgewell, our objectives include teaching employment skills, providing coaching services, and job placement for people with developmental disabilities including ASD. Each person in the program has a personalized career plan and goals based on their interests and abilities.

One such example is Zach, an inspiring young man who loves his job at Prides Deli and Pizzeria in Beverly, Massachusetts. For Zach, his role is much more than just a job and earning a paycheck. It’s his way to experience a personal sense of pride and accomplishment. When at work, Zach engages with coworkers and customers in the storefront, who see him as the friendly, dedicated, and hardworking team member that he is. He also helps make nearby deliveries, which includes accompanying a driver to hand-deliver meals to students at nearby Endicott College who look forward to seeing him on campus.
Without local businesses like Prides Deli giving people with disabilities a chance, these employment opportunities would not be available to them. To date, they have employed a dozen people participating in Bridgewell’s Employment Support Program. Prides Deli is one of more than a dozen local employment partners that are dedicated to empowering people with ASD and developmental disabilities in our local community.

Others include North Shore Community College, McDonalds, North Shore Navigators, A&J Cleaning Services, and more.

To ensure that our friends, neighbors and family members living with ASD can experience the same sense of pride, and have an opportunity to live full, independent lives, continued support from local community businesses and area residents is critical.

If you are interested in becoming an employment partner and spreading autistic pride year-round, please contact Marc Jamieson at MJamieson@bridgewell.org.

Christopher Tuttle is president and chief executive officer of Bridgewell, a Peabody-based organization committed to empowering people with disabilities.