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From Awareness to Action: How CSM Technologies Is Building a World That Belongs to Every Mind

2nd Apr,2026



Awareness is where the conversation starts. But for CSM Technologies, it is never where the work ends. Over the past two years, CSM has moved from acknowledging neurodiversity to engineering systems for it — through two distinct, powerful, and deeply human initiatives: **PECS Café** and **Project AURA**.

On this World Autism Awareness Day, we do not simply want to mark a date on the calendar. We want to account for what has actually been built — and for the lives that are changing because of it. This is not a story about intent. It is a story about action, about infrastructure, and above all, about the dignity every person deserves.

The Reality We Cannot Ignore

India is estimated to be home to approximately 18 million individuals with autism (SparshMind Innovations, 2024) and yet the pathways to education, employment, and independent living remain critically underserved. In India, the unemployment rate for

individuals with autism is estimated to be around 95% among the highest in the world. Globally, nearly 80% of adults with autism are unemployed or underemployed, even though many have the skills and abilities to work (ENNA). These are not abstract statistics ,they are lives held back by systems that were never designed with them in mind.

CSM Technologies chose not to look away from these numbers. Instead, we asked a harder question: what does it take to change them?

PECS Café: Where It All Began

Before frameworks. Before research partnerships. Before blueprints. It began with a café.

PECS Café is an initiative by the **Zain Foundation Trust**, founded and driven by **Gargi Bhattacharya** with a singular belief, that individuals with autism, given the right environment and opportunity, are more than capable of holding their own in the world of work. CSM Technologies recognised that belief and chose to stand behind it in the most tangible way possible: by opening its campus in Patia, Bhubaneswar, as the café's home.

That decision meant something. It meant that every Tuesday and Thursday, four young adults with autism -**Tanmay Dalei, Saurav Das, Tanaya Leela Chaudhury, and Reyan Ali** - walk into a professional space, serve a live audience of CSM employees, take orders, manage interactions, and do what so many said they could not: hold a role, build a routine, and earn their place with quiet, consistent excellence.



The café uses the **Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS)** -an image-based communication method that enables its team to interact with customers confidently and

independently. The menu itself is picture-based, thoughtfully designed to ensure ease of communication for both staff and visitors. On the menu: tea, coffee, gupchup, masala mudhi, sandwiches, and muffins. But what is truly being served, cup by cup and visit by visit, is confidence, independence, and proof.

Featured in *The New Indian Express*, PECS Café has drawn national attention, not as a charity initiative, but as a model of what genuine collaboration between civil society and the corporate world can produce. The Zain Foundation brought the vision and the expertise. CSM brought the space, the platform, and a workforce willing to show up as customers, colleagues, and quiet advocates every Tuesday and Thursday.

Tanmay, Saurav, Tanaya, and Reyan are not props in a story about corporate responsibility. They are the story. And their story taught CSM something important: that given the right conditions, the potential was always there. The question was how to build those conditions at scale.

Project AURA: Building the Architecture



PECS Café proved what was possible. Project AURA asks how to make it replicable.

"Dignity lives in the ability to earn, contribute, and belong. Work is not a reward. It is a right."

These words, spoken by **Lagna Panda, Whole-Time Director & CHRO of CSM Technologies**, capture the conviction at the heart of Project AURA **(Autism Upskilling and Resource Accessibility)** . Developed in partnership with research partner Saarathee, AURA is not a pilot programme or a CSR gesture. It is a replicable, research-driven framework

designed to solve autism employability at the level of systems, not individuals.

Its diagnosis is clear and unflinching: the problem is not a lack of talent. The problem is that our systems -our hiring filters, our skilling pathways, our workplace cultures- are designed to find deficits, not strengths. AURA sets out to reverse that.

The framework rests on four pillars:

Mapping Vocational Strengths. Assessment begins with what someone can do, not what they cannot. Rather than screening for deficits, AURA starts with strength-based evaluation , identifying capabilities like pattern recognition, sustained focus, precision, and memory as the professional assets they truly are.

Building a Targeted Skilling Ecosystem. Generic training is not enough. AURA maps institutes, vocational centres, and community programmes equipped for autism, and designs personalised learning pathways tied to real market demand , not just certification. Skilling without destination is preparation without purpose.

Connecting Talent with Opportunity. Job matching based on strengths, not generic filters. Crucially, AURA deploys job coaches and coordinators who remain present well beyond the first week , because placement is the beginning, not the end.

Centre of Excellence. A CoE that builds the capacity to keep solving the problem ,developing playbooks for employers, skilling partners, and coordinators; documenting what works, what doesn't, and why; and building replicable models designed to scale, not just showcase.

"Autism employability is not a CSR challenge. It is a workforce architecture problem." -**Lagna Panda, WTD & CHRO, CSM Technologies**

AURA also directly challenges corporates to do more than accommodate. To redesign roles. To rethink communication norms and onboarding sequences. To measure contribution differently — because loyalty, accuracy, and deep focus are business assets, not concessions. The future of work, in fields like AI, data analytics, quality and compliance, and technology, already demands the very strengths that autistic cognition naturally offers. The question is whether organisations are built to recognise and harness them.

From a Café to a Movement

Taken together, PECS Café and Project AURA tell a single, coherent story, one that began on the ground, with four young people and a picture-based menu and has grown into a systemic framework for national impact.

PECS Café is the lived proof: that belonging is possible, that independence can be built, and that the right environment changes everything. Project AURA is the architecture: the research, the frameworks, the CoEs, and the employer partnerships that carry that proof from one campus café to an entire economy.

CSM's commitment extends beyond employment too. Sensory-friendly environments ,spaces deliberately designed to reduce anxiety, support emotional regulation, and enable safe social connection, are as critical as any employment pathway. The design of PECS Café itself reflects these principles: a thoughtful environment where the team can thrive, not merely function.

Our Call to Action

On this World Autism Awareness Day 2026, CSM Technologies renews its commitment — and sharpens its ask to the broader ecosystem.

To corporates: Design roles for neurodiverse strengths, not just adapt existing ones. Appoint a neurodiversity lead within HR. Commit to multi-year retention data, not headline hires.

To the skilling ecosystem: Align outcomes to the full employment journey, not just the training component. Standardise success metrics. Map what sustains a career, not just what produces a placement.

To policymakers and NGOs: Move policy from aspiration to infrastructure. Understand the systemic barriers that cannot be solved organisation by organisation. Demand solutions at the architecture level.

To all of us: Challenge the assumption that employment for individuals with autism is a concession. Celebrate autistic talent, publicly, specifically, and consistently. And come visit PECS Café sometime. Order a cup of coffee. Let what you experience there change how you think about ability, dignity, and what a truly inclusive workplace looks like.

Inclusivity should be the norm-not the exception. It is a phrase easy to print on a banner and genuinely hard to build into an organisation. CSM Technologies is committed to the harder work.

"Inclusion is not about fitting people into systems. It is about redesigning systems to unlock people." -**Lagna Panda, WTD & CHRO, CSM Technologies**



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