

**Embracing Neurodiversity in the Workplace:
Unlocking Untapped Potential**

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the Neurodiversity movement has gained momentum challenging traditional perceptions of neurological conditions. Neurodiverse individuals possess unique cognitive abilities and perspectives that can significantly contribute to the workplace. This paper explores the concept of embracing neurodiversity that advocates for an inclusive and accommodating work environment that fosters the full potential of neurodiverse employees. By doing so, organizations can enhance their productivity, innovation, and bottom line while promoting diversity, equality, and a stronger society.

Understanding Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity encompasses a range of neurological conditions, such as autism, dyspraxia, and dyslexia. Contrary to misconceptions, neurodiverse individuals often possess exceptional skills in pattern recognition, memory, mathematics, and other domains (Austin and Pisano, 2017). According to Russo et al. (2023), “When it comes to hiring, management, and retention in the workplace, individuals with differences such as autism, dyslexia, or Tourette syndrome are often discounted by employers, to the detriment of the individuals and employers alike” (para. 1). It is crucial to view these diverse cognitive traits as strengths rather than weaknesses, valuing the diverse perspectives neurodiverse individuals offer.

The neurodiverse movement recognizes and argues, “there is no single way for a brain to be normal”, these neurocognitive differences can benefit organizations and society in general (Russo et al, 2023). As the article “*Helping*” points out, organizations and individuals advocating

for the neurodiverse movement, "...counter social stigma and promote awareness of the wide range of strengths and challenges faced by individuals and groups that are neurodivergent (para. 1). Neurodivergences and neurodiverse people has been looked upon as having a "disease" that requires "treatment" in order to be "cured". This sector of the population tends to simply process stimuli and their environment differently. To put it another way, Baumer & Frueh (2021) state that in the neurodiversity movement, "differences are not viewed as deficits" and points out that there is no "right" way for a person to think, learn, interact, or behave as people experience the world around them in many different ways (para. 1). As most neurodivergent individuals express certain eccentricities and exhibit behaviors that may seem odd to a neurotypical person, these differences do not diminish their intelligence or ability to work out and solve complex problems in the workplace.

The Business Case for Neurodiversity

A 2022 study by the US National Institutes of Health (NIH) reiterates and estimates that up to one fifth of the global population exhibits some form of neurodivergence ("*Helping,*" 2023, Neurodivergence section). The global market for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) is expected to grow by almost \$29 billion by 2030; however, most DEI programs overlook neurodiversity. About 1 in 10 organizations specifically includes neurodiversity in their DEI programs, despite the estimates that 15% to 20% of the world population is neurodivergent. Including neurodiversity into company DEI programs is not only important for fairness and inclusion but also for the advantages and unique perspectives that neurodiverse employees can bring to the table (Russo et al, 2023).

Embracing neurodiversity in the corporate world leads to tangible benefits for businesses. Research and case studies reveal that neurodiverse employees bring unique problem-solving

approaches and fresh perspectives. As a result, organizations witness enhanced productivity, improved product quality, increased employee engagement, and higher profitability, contributing to a competitive advantage (Austin and Pisano, 2017). Several large conglomerates who have incorporated neurodiversity into their DEI programs, such as Deloitte, Hewlett Packard Enterprise, JPMorgan, Earnst & Young, and SAP, have recognized the benefits neurodiverse employees have contributed and can contribute.

Including neurodiversity in DEI programs not only has improved companies' reputation, innovation, and employee engagement, but Russo et al. (2023) gives specific examples of successful DEI programs that include:

- SAP: A neurodivergent employee helped to resolve a technical issue resulting in a \$40 million savings on a single project.
- JPMorgan: has reported that their neurodivergent employees are significantly more productive and complete tasks more quickly than their neurotypical coworkers.
- Ernst & Young: reports that their neurodivergent employees have identified process improvements cutting technical training time in half, learn how to automate processes faster, and excel at innovation (para. 6).

Creating an Inclusive Workplace

In order to cultivate an inclusive work environment businesses, need to adopt a model that centers on open-mindedness, and empathy, which is best achieved through education. According to K. Wilson, a Neurodiverse undergraduate student in her senior year attending Chico State University who is the current President and co-founding member of the student Neurodiversity Club on campus, neurodiverse people often face challenges such as over

stimulation, whether that be audible, visual, and/or any stimuli to the five senses. Something as simple as fluorescent lighting can be a painful experience for them that hinders their productivity and quality of life (personal communication, June 29, 2023). Neurodiverse people may exhibit certain eccentricities as they sometimes interpret and convey social cues and empathy differently; they may display behaviors such as avoiding eye contact, have an atypical volume or rate of speech, and have trouble reciprocating nonverbal cues (Russo et al, 2023). Being disregarded for simply being themselves is not conducive to a good quality of life. Through education, empathy, and open-mindedness, managers and co-workers can create a welcoming, inclusive working environment helping neurodiverse employees to reach their full potential.

Accommodations and Support

Minor adjustments and accommodations play a crucial role in empowering neurodiverse employees to thrive in the workplace. Providing flexibility in work arrangements, creating sensory-friendly office spaces, and offering mentorship programs are some of the strategies that foster an environment conducive to their success. The Specialisterne Foundation's (n.d.) non-interview-based assessment methods have proven effective in tapping into the diverse talents of neurodiverse individuals; their focus on, "...adoption of more effective and inclusive methods for candidate recruitment, selection, onboarding, employee education, and management have proven effective across the globe (Focus section). Specialisterne's non-interview-based assessment methods have proven effective in tapping into the diverse talents of neurodiverse individuals (Austin and Pisano, 2017). By adapting hiring and training practices, and providing subtle, minor accommodations, organizations can unleash the full potential of neurodiverse talent.

In closing, with all the advances in medical research and technology, society is gaining a deeper understanding of neurodiversity. Rather than viewing neurodiverse individuals as needing "treatment" or being "ill," it is recognized that their brains process information and stimuli in unique and valuable ways. Autism and other forms of neurodiversity represent a spectrum of abilities that can greatly benefit the workplace. Changes in hiring, recruitment, and onboarding coupled with subtle accommodations will help companies and neurodiverse individuals realize the benefits of harnessing their unique skills and qualities. Treating neurodiverse individuals with the same respect and equal opportunities enables them to thrive, contribute, and celebrate their unique abilities. Doing so, businesses can create a more inclusive, diverse, and innovative work environment, leading to greater success and societal progress.

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