

Inclusive strategies for welcoming neurodiverse team members

Posted on November 23, 2022 (<https://thewholeu.uw.edu/2022/11/23/welcoming-neurodiverse-colleagues-to-the-workplace/>) by Nicole Reeve-Parker (<https://thewholeu.uw.edu/author/nicolereeveparker/>). This entry was posted in Engaging Interests (<https://thewholeu.uw.edu/category/engaging-interests/>) and tagged neurodiversity (<https://thewholeu.uw.edu/tag/neurodiversity/>). Bookmark the permalink (<https://thewholeu.uw.edu/2022/11/23/welcoming-neurodiverse-colleagues-to-the-workplace/>).

Creating an inclusive and diverse workplace culture is fundamental for everyone's success.

Whether neurodivergent or neurotypical, the most productive workplace is one in which people are mentally and physically healthy and feel safe enough to put their whole selves into their work.

Neurodiversity (<https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/what-is-neurodiversity-202111232645>) is a term we hear a lot these days—and that's a good thing: it denotes understanding, accepting and accommodating the fact of brain-based difference, or neurodivergence, in brain function and behavioral traits.

Neurodivergence is strongly associated with autism, but also comprises people with ADHD, intellectual disability or learning disability, mental illness, Down syndrome, dementia, traumatic brain injuries (TBI), and others.

Central to the idea of neurodiversity is that there is no right or wrong way to experience the world—how we think, learn and behave—just different ways.

The term neurodiversity originated in the late 1990s, challenging the predominant view of neurological difference as fundamentally pathological and instead suggesting that neurodiversity be recognized as a social category like gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or disability status.

"It is important to recognize neurodiversity because it is an important natural aspect of our human diversity," said Hala Annabi (<https://ischool.uw.edu/people/faculty/profile/hpannabi>), Associate Professor and Chair of the MSIM program at the UW Information School (<https://ischool.uw.edu/>). "Recognizing diversity is affirming of our personhood and supportive of our different ways of being."

With an estimated 15% to 20% of the population (<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7732033/>) being neurodivergent, not just accepting but celebrating the fact of human neurodiversity is essential for all people to live their best lives.

"Acceptance and understanding of neurodiversity create team dynamics that empower people to contribute their talents to their teams in ways that are natural and healthy for them," Annabi continued. "This increases both individual empowerment and satisfaction, and team innovation and productivity."

Misconceptions about neurodivergence in the workplace

Workplaces have historically been, and continue to be, designed for people who fit into the 'neurotypical' category, with neurotypicals not even realizing the extent to which their workplace is a challenge for neurodiverse people, whose unique workplace challenges will vary depending on their

neurodistinctness, gender, race, lived experiences and other factors.

“The work culture that values neurotypical social behaviors and ways of work expects neurodistinct people to assimilate,” Annabi explained. “Existing stereotypes of neurodistinct people often present questions about their legitimacy and competence in the workplace and limit their inclusion to a handful of job roles or industries.”

Neurodiverse people often engage in masking (<https://autismawarenesscentre.com/what-is-autistic-masking/>) (modifying one’s behavior to conform to conventions of neurotypical social behavior) their disability to compensate for their inability to fit in. Masking, in turn, causes increased stress and anxiety and frequent misunderstandings on both sides of the encounter.

Despite the recent uptick in conversations around neurodiversity in the workplace, many misconceptions persist about neurodivergent people and how they do or do not function at work. Common misconceptions—all of which are untrue—are that neurodivergence:

- Is related to IQ
- Only affects people who speak English as their first language
- Can only be diagnosed when someone is a child
- Is about not being able to read and write
- Means people can only do certain jobs

However, the challenges in obtaining employment for those who are neurodivergent are well-known (<https://autismspectrumnews.org/neurodiversity-hiring-programs-a-path-to-employment/>) and lead to higher unemployment and under-employment rates than their neurotypical counterparts.

Indeed, not everyone will have disclosed that they are neurodiverse in their job application or interview; some may be fearful of being stigmatized, while others might have never been officially diagnosed.

Differences in communication style

One of the most recognizable differences between neurodivergent and neurotypical employees is communication style. Neurodivergent individuals tend to take words very literally and have trouble with sarcasm, suggestion and innuendo, called context blindness (http://www.cmcgc.com/media/handouts/101103/230_Peter_Vermeulen.pdf). They are sometimes perceived as rude for their direct and honest communication style.

Another common difference, particularly in those on the Autism Spectrum, is with executive functioning (<https://www.understood.org/en/learning-thinking-differences/child-learning-disabilities/executive-functioning-issues/what-is-executive-function>)—the ability to set goals, plan ahead and accomplish tasks.

Similarly, differences with central coherence, or the inability to see the big picture—as in, not seeing the forest for the trees—can result in neurodiverse people being less likely to take chances.

One manifestation of central coherence mismatch is that neurodiverse people may not apply for a job unless they meet the requirements exactly, resulting in many missed opportunities on both sides. An easy fix to this issue is to make job postings brief and concise, listing only the essential skills required to start working on day one.

These differences in communication styles, rather than being seen as liabilities in the workplace, should be embraced as assets. Direct, clear communication among coworkers demonstrates both acceptance of difference and a commitment to transparency in the workgroup.

Auditing accessibility

Neurodiverse people might experience sensitivity to lights, sounds, smells, temperatures, and the ambient environment, resulting in a stress-inducing and exhausting office environment. **The constant stress and resultant masking are significant factors in neurodiverse people's susceptibility to burnout.**

"The most significant challenge is that managers and co-workers lack awareness of neurodiversity and know very little about effective communication and collaboration strategies to truly inclusive and empowering of neurodivergent people," Annabi said. "Although many of the practices are basic leadership and collaboration practices, they are not universally used or understood."

Auditing the accessibility of the work environment is essential to mitigating stress and burnout, diversifying hiring and making the work environment more equitable.

The online job application process that many organizations, including UW, use is a good place to start. Some factors related to digital accessibility include:

- Are applicants getting timed out?
- Is a Dyslexic-friendly font being used?
- Do videos have alt tags?
- Are the right color contrasts being used?

Then, there is the interview stage. Although neurodiverse people may excel in important areas, many don't interview well. For example, many neurodiverse people have difficulty with eye contact and are overly forthright about their weaknesses.

Deeper dive: Neurodiversity as a competitive advantage
(<https://hbr.org/2017/05/neurodiversity-as-a-competitive-advantage>)
(Harvard Business Review)

Nontraditional assessments, in which neurodiverse job candidates can demonstrate their abilities in casual interactions over the course of a day or even several days, have become standard for organizations seeking to make the hiring process more equitable.

During the assessment, and after a hire is made, providing accommodations such as indirect lighting and noise-canceling headphones are effective and inexpensive. Offering flexible work schedules and locations are also helpful.

And perhaps the most essential element for the success of neurodiverse colleagues in the workplace is making sure they feel seen and supported: "It is important to know that the needs and preferences of neurodistinct individuals, as is the case of neurotypical individuals, vary greatly," Annabi explained. She urges colleagues to use the following strategies with their neurodiverse coworkers:

- Start with self-awareness about their own biases and expectations of others
- Focus on the strengths of each individual
- Recognize the individual's unique needs and preferences
- Ask respectful questions

- Follow the individual's lead

Benefits of a neurodiverse workplace

The neurodiversity movement (<https://thinkingautismguide.com/so-youre-doing-story-about>) centers neurodivergent people's rights and value as human beings. Proponents of the movement assert that all people – neurodiverse or neurotypical, autistic or allistic – can have happy and meaningful lives, regardless of whether they meet conventional expectations of success or not.

Neurodivergent people have a variety of remarkable skills to contribute to the workplace (<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/employment/employing-autistic-people/employers>): incredible pattern recognition, sustained concentration ability, extraordinary memory and information recall and, most importantly, creative and innovative solutions to complex problems.

In the Seattle area, there are pioneering companies that have begun seeking out neurodiverse talent—Microsoft's neurodiversity hiring program (<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/diversity/inside-microsoft/cross-disability/neurodiversityhiring>), for example, as part of its diversity and inclusion initiative, offers a multi-day hiring program structured to provide an inclusive hiring experience.

Professor Annabi would like to see UW become a model employer for neurodiverse employees, but there is work to be done. "The inclusion of any historically marginalized group requires both a societal change and an institutional one," she said. "Institutional changes must combat deeply routed biases around who is competent, what competence looks like, what is acceptable behavior and who should or can do a particular type of work."

"Our practices and expectations to support employees throughout the employee lifecycle are plagued with neurotypical preferences and expectations."

Workplaces should strive to offer every new employee an onboarding system that is structured, flexible, and easy to navigate (<https://clickup.com/blog/how-our-onboarding-team-uses-clickup/>). And each of us, as colleagues and friends, can make our workspace a healthy, happy and productive place where every employee can put their best selves into their work.

Watch the recording of our recent panel discussion, Inclusive strategies for welcoming neurodiverse team members (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YZAZJyxzeig>)