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Thinking Differently: Neurodiversity in the Workplace

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Introduction

This project set out to advance understanding of how neurodiverse individuals survive and thrive in the workplace. Neurodiversity is “the diversity of human brains and minds- the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species” (Walker 2014). Forms of neurodivergence include dyslexia, dyscalculia, ADHD, Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and dyspraxia, among others. These neurological differences impact on individuals’ information processing and neurocognitive executive functioning, resulting in the brain working differently to the way society expects (Bewley and George, 2016).

As part of a growing agenda for diverse and inclusive workplaces organizations are now recognising the value of neurodiversity, and are partnering with various experts to provide training for HR professionals to embrace neurodiverse candidates. As a first step it is important that we understand what neurodiverse employees want and need from managers, colleagues and leadership development programmes. Therefore, this initial phase of research aimed to investigate the work and employment experiences of the neurodiverse, with a view to identifying positive changes and additions that could be implemented by executive teams, managers and employers.

Dyslexia – “Dyslexia is a learning difference which primarily affects reading and writing skills. However, it does not only affect these skills. Dyslexia is actually about information processing. Dyslexic people may have difficulty processing and remembering information they see and hear, which can affect learning and the acquisition of literacy skills. Dyslexia can also impact on other areas such as organisational skills.” (British Dyslexia Association, 2019)

Dyspraxia – “Dyspraxia, a form of developmental coordination disorder (DCD) is a common disorder affecting fine and/ or gross motor coordination in children and adults. It may also affect speech. DCD is a lifelong condition, formally recognised by international organisations including the World Health Organisation” (Dyspraxia Foundation, 2019)

ADHD – “Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is one of the most common childhood disorders and it can continue through adolescence and into adulthood. Symptoms include difficulty staying focused and paying attention, difficulty controlling behaviour, and hyperactivity (over-activity).” (ADHD Foundation, 2019)

Autism Spectrum Disorder – “Autism is a lifelong developmental disability that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others. Autistic people see, hear and feel the world differently to other people. Autism is a spectrum condition. All autistic people share certain difficulties but being autistic will affect them in different ways.” (National Autistic Society, 2019)

Theoretical Background

THE NEURODIVERSITY PARADIGM

The neurodiversity paradigm is an emergent paradigm in which neurodiversity is understood to be a form of human diversity that is subject to the same social dynamics as other forms of diversity. The central tenets of this approach state that neurodiversity is a natural and valuable form of human diversity and that the idea of there being one “normal” type of brain is culturally constructed (Armstrong 2015). The neurodiversity paradigm therefore conceptualises neurodivergence traditionally regarded as atypical, such as autism and dyslexia, as normal human variation (Jaarsma and Welin 2011). As such, neurodiversity is viewed as different rather than disordered. Rather than requiring treatment or a cure this kind of human specificity is understood to reflect a different way of socialising, communicating or sensing. These differences are recognised as a valuable part of human diversity that should be respected and embraced by the social institutions that govern our everyday life (Jaarsma and Welin 2012). The

neurodiversity paradigm also suggests that living in a society designed for neurotypical individuals contributes to, and exacerbates, many of the daily living challenges that neurodiverse people experience (Robertson 2009). If we can understand and recognise some of these ingrained biases we may be able to access the untapped potential of those with neurodiversity in the workplace. Research has suggested links between neurodiversity and creativity of thought (Best et al 2015), as well as innovation and ability to visualise problems (Armstrong 2010). By creating environments where these individuals can flourish we stand not only to improve their progression and engagement but also to benefit the companies and businesses they operate in.

Large companies including, GCHQ, Virgin, Microsoft and the BBC have recognised this potential and run targeted neurodiversity recruitment programmes, to specifically attract individuals with dyslexia, dyspraxia, and those on the autism spectrum.

NEURODIVERSITY IN THE WORKFORCE

Studies of neurodiverse employees in the workforce have generally focused on the barriers they face. People with ASD have been found to experience challenges in securing and sustaining competitive employment (Barnhill 2007). As a group they are more likely to be unemployed, underemployed or malemployed, than the wider population. This can lead to stress, depression, isolation and financial insecurity (Goode Rutter and Howlin 1994). Studies exploring the experiences of adults with dyslexia (De beer et al 2014) and Autism spectrum disorder (Hurlbutt and Chalmers 2004) identify that many have difficulties acquiring and sustaining employment as well as challenges in relation to sharing their diagnosis with employers.

Certain forms of neurodiversity have been associated with challenges around progression and role development. Individuals on the Autism spectrum are underrepresented in senior roles, since career advancement and progression are often predicated on previous vocation success. Muller et al (2003) suggest that these individuals can become trapped in a vicious cycle of entry level jobs, despite holding often impressive records of academic attainment. It has also been suggested that elements of management roles may not appeal to neurodiverse individuals. In many roles’ progression requires an undertaking of managerial responsibilities or increasing client facing duties, those who experience difficulties with social communication are unlikely to push forward in these roles. For many the interview process alone may be enough of a deterrent to progression. Whether this apparent stall in career progression is the result of socially constructed barriers or personal choices, there remains space and responsibility for executive education to design inclusive teaching that can develop skills in all leaders, not just those deemed neurotypical.

We have spoken to 13 individuals with a diagnosed neurodiversity about their career trajectory and experiences of executive education or adult learning. Participants represented several neurodiversities including ADHD, Dyslexia and Dyspraxia. They ranged in age from 25 to 78 years old and worked in a variety of sectors both public and private. Some were working in entry level jobs, while others had progressed to more senior roles with significant responsibility. Some were self-employed while others worked within an organisation. Their level of satisfaction with their current or previous jobs varied, as one would expect from any cross-section of society. While the majority were interviewed, several felt more comfortable completing an online survey and were given the opportunity to do so. Preliminary analysis was conducted to identify common themes across the dataset that reflect the narratives of neurodiverse individuals at work. Here we present a brief overview of the initial findings and recommendations.

“I’m aware I’m not stupid but it can sometimes make me think other people might get the impression that I am”

“In the absence of real knowledge or understanding, [my employer has] seen a label, gone away and done a bit of research and put me in that bracket, not really seeing me as an individual”

“The application processes is often against these kinds of people so at the first hurdle it shows [the company] don’t have a true understanding”

WHAT ARE THE CHALLENGES OF BEING NEURODIVERSE IN THE WORKPLACE?

Participants were open about some of the challenges they face in the workplace. Understandably the processing of information was a particularly recurrent challenge for many. Often jobs require employees to read information, absorb it and action it quickly, via emails, reports or forms. Participants suggested that being asked to read and action information ‘on the spot’ or with little time was often very stressful. Many found strategies to combat this, asking for information verbally or having editable email templates to reduce the time it takes to formulate a response. Crucially, many participants spoke of the extra effort they put into these outwardly ‘simple’ tasks to protect their image as neuro-typical. They spoke of employing software such as Siri, Grammarly and Google translate to assist them during the day, sometimes hiding this from colleagues so as not to draw attention and encourage colleagues to question their ability.

For some expressing information verbally was a challenge, making presentations and meetings stressful situations. Participants described difficulty formulating and articulating the right words despite completely understanding what they need to convey. For others, this was a strength and their difficulty lay in writing the information, in an email exchange for example, similarly completely understanding but unable to get that information out of their head and onto the screen. As a result, participants again found strategies to combat this, asking colleagues for advice, encouraging face-to-face or verbal communication rather than lengthy email exchanges. Participants spoke about playing to their strengths in this regard, often leading them to excel in a certain area.

Participants also reported that their neurodiversity made them appear scatty, disorganised, overly fidgety or ‘accident prone’, leading some to feel like less desirable teammates or colleagues. This reflects how many challenges were compounded by participants’ beliefs about how they were perceived by others. Often stemming from childhood, participants were fearful that others would view them as stupid or slow. Participants who had disclosed to their employers and colleagues tried to explain and educate on what their neurodiversity meant, stressing that they simply process information differently to others.

“I think there are definitely things I’m better at than other people because of the dyspraxia and if I found a job that allowed me to indulge that it would be win-win for the company and me”

“I think if you’ve got something special or different about you, well shout about it. It helps people understand where your shadowy parts are, they might feel more comfortable supporting you”

“You’ve got to play the cards your dealt, I’d love to be good at reading and not struggle but you can’t change it so you just have to find out what you can and can’t do and play to your strengths”

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF BEING NEURODIVERSE IN THE WORKPLACE?

Participants spoke about their neurodiversity as integral to who they are, presenting some challenges but also providing them with a unique way of viewing the world and responding to tasks they face. Some referenced their increased hardiness to criticism, often having grown up scrutinized by peers, teachers and sometimes family before a neurodiversity was diagnosed.

As children at school and now adults in the workforce neurodiverse participants spoke of the constant need to develop creative solutions to manage the challenges presented by a world designed for neurotypical people. As a result, several of the participants spoke of their creativity at work, their unique way of finding solutions to difficult problems, and their entrepreneurial spirit. For some, the typical work environment didn’t accommodate their unique perspective and they set out to start their own businesses. The three participants who had done so had very successful careers, navigating the challenges, free to adapt as they needed to.

Many participants were aware of their strengths and worked hard to develop these, in their view, to compensate for other areas in which they were less confident. As a result, participants spoke about their excellent memory, their proficiency with maths and numbers, their ability to visualise problems and solutions, their exceptional interpersonal skills or logical thinking. Each participant was able to recognise an area of strength often choosing careers that allowed them to flourish either consciously or unconsciously.

“Managers should be approachable, light-hearted, make people feel comfortable and [let them] know that its ok not to match your peers, you have other qualities that someone else won’t have. Everyone is completely different but together we can all help each other”

“I knew that nobody would employ me, for any good job... I realised that I could never get a university degree, there was no point in trying, so I understood the only way I could do something was to start my own company. So that’s what I did.”

WHAT CAN MANAGERS DO TO HELP NEURODIVERSE EMPLOYEES THRIVE?

Managers and organisations can make improvements from the outset by ensuring their job application processes are not excluding or disadvantaging neurodiverse candidates. All participants with dyslexia and dyspraxia spoke of their difficulty completing forms. One participant who was presented with an application form to complete at interview walked away on receipt of the instruction, knowing he wouldn’t be able to complete the request. Providing reasonable alternatives to forms or allowing candidates and employees time to take the form away and call on their support networks is a simple step to overcome this barrier.

For many participants sharing their neurodiversity was a source of anxiety, with many fearing the consequences of telling their boss or colleagues. They voiced the need for an understanding and informed employer who would enquire as to their specific needs and challenges and allow them to showcase their strengths. Some felt that more needed to be done to inform colleagues of the reality of neurodiversity, since these are the people who receive the bulk of day-to-day communication.

Recommendations

- **Write inclusive job descriptions when hiring** – avoid generic and cliched requirements in job descriptions such as ‘confident communicator’ or ‘highly organised’, if these skills aren’t essential, potential candidates could be deterred from applying for a job they would be well placed for.
- **Avoid long application forms** – be willing to speak to candidates on the phone or send a CV and cover letter if easier. Avoid on the spot forms or timed tasks at interview.
- **Be informed** – learn about the specific neurodiversity, don’t rely on your assumptions or media representations. Ask open questions to understand different ways of doing things, establish the individual’s strengths and allow them space to demonstrate them and build confidence.
- **Be aware of the impact of a last minute change** – avoid asking employees to quickly absorb new information and respond to it, provide as much time as you can and support when the change is unavoidable.
- **Think before you speak** – using terms like ‘stupid’ or ‘lazy’, even in jest, can have a damaging effect on those who may have been incorrectly labelled as such as children. Don’t engage in office gossip about errors or mistakes.
- **Recognise potential** – Unique ways of thinking and working are a huge benefit to your business, recognise the potential of neuro-diverse employees and allow them space to excel.

“Getting up and getting involved is going to be much better than sitting there and reading it”

Recommendations

WHAT DO NEURODIVERSE EMPLOYEES WANT FROM EXECUTIVE EDUCATION?

Only several participants had accessed executive education in a formal sense, some having done additional training and others having left school at 16 and never returned to an education setting. The latter had avoided adult education fearing that they would not be able to keep up, that it would be akin to their experience at school. To combat this, participants suggested that they wanted more practical learning opportunities, role play exercises and interactive experiences.

- **Explore alternatives** – Recognise that the way neurodiverse employees learn is different to the way you might expect. Explore practical or experiential learning, be visual, tell stories, allow participants to role play.
- **Be flexible** – Allow for more time to digest and record information, don’t insist on this being done in a certain way, let people draw, write or record if it helps them. Repetition is key, allow space and time for employees to re-read and repeat tasks.
- **Be prepared** – Provide physical aides (blue lights, overlays) for those with dyslexia and be cautious of the physical space for those who have sensory or spatial sensitivities.
- **Keep it brief** – Avoid text heavy documents and presentations, if information must be provided in this format consider bullet points of key information or audio-visual modes of delivery. Always have alternative formats available for those who use specialist equipment e.g screen readers. Write and speak in plain language, avoiding jargon as much as possible.



Conclusions

Findings suggest that while neurodiverse employees face challenges in the workforce, these challenges can be overcome with understanding and adaptation. Crucially, neurodiverse employees have much to offer with unique ways of processing information, problem solving and communicating. Employers must ensure they are facilitating inclusive working practices at all levels and continue to acknowledge the untapped potential of those with neurodiversity.

Future Steps

These initial interviews have allowed us access to the views and experiences of a handful of employees with a diagnosed neurodiversity. As we continue to highlight these experiences, we would also like to understand more about the organisations hiring those with neurodiverse traits, characteristics and diagnoses, including those on the Autism spectrum. This will be the focus of our second phase of work, if you are interested in finding out more or wish to include yourself, your company or organisation in the study please contact: Dr Emma Day-Duro at research@ashridge.hult.edu

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