



Supporting Neurodivergent Talent in the Workplace

Introduction

What is “Neurodiversity”? Neurodiversity is a term defined by Judy Singer in the 1990’s which put simply means that there is a range of diversity in which human brains work. Additionally, with the human brain there is a variety of ways in which we think, learn, process information, and relate to others. As human beings intrinsically we do not all think, learn and process information in the same way. Yet for the last hundred or so years, the diversity in the way the human brain operates wasn’t recognised. It was long considered that there was only one way of functioning and that any other way of thinking, learning, or processing information must be considered wrong or disordered. Sadly, our societies for

years have failed to factor in those who did not meet the supposed standards of normal brain function. Today, many people are given labels or categorised as having neurological differences or disabilities such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism. Society for so long was fixated with fixing these individuals to make them become more typical.

Yet, over the last 20 or so years, the neurodiversity movement has gained increasing recognition. In purely simplistic terms Neurodiversity refers to a diversity in the way in which human brains function, learn, think, and relate to others. Neurodiversity as a term suggests that these differences are an innate part of human variation which is to be expected.

Key Neurodiversity terminology

Neurodiversity: The diversity of ways in which the human brain thinks, relates, understands, and processes information.

Neurotypical: Refers to a person whose neurocognitive functionality falls within the societal standards of “normal”. A person without a diagnosis or label is typically classed as neurotypical.

Neurodivergent: Refers to a person who does not fall within the normal societal standards of what is classed as “normal”. Currently, anybody with a label or diagnosis such as autism or ADHD will be classed as neurodivergent.

Neurodiverse: This refers to a group who will be neurodiverse if several different ways of neurocognitive functions are represented within that group.

Neurocognitive: This term refers to the mental processes that will take place in the brain. For example, the abilities to process, remember and retrieve information.

Who we are?

My name is Oliver Fenghour and I am the Founding Director of Advance: The Disability Consultants which is a specialist neurodiversity consultancy business. I have Asperger's Syndrome and I was diagnosed on the autistic spectrum when I was 10 years old.

Advance: The Disability Consultants was founded in the Autumn of 2019 primarily in response to my own personal and professional experiences of the workplace. I worked for organisations some of whom understood and accepted my differences of being autistic. However, other organisations saw my autism as a problem and never made allowances or provided appropriate reasonable adjustments for me in the workplace. I am an expert by experience in the autism space and I also have extensive professional experience having worked in recruitment and learning and development whilst also having a chartered HR qualification in UK employment law.

Advance: The Disability Consultants is a specialist neurodiversity consultancy business which works with organisations globally to help them become neurodiversity confident employers. We provide training, consultancy, and partnerships to help organisations acquire the confidence, knowledge, and skills necessary to recruit, support and develop autistic talent within their workplaces. We live by our organisational values of Achieve, Change & Empower, and aim to help organisations see the considerable business benefits and positive attributes that hiring autistic talent can bring to their organisation.

Why societal attitudes and mindsets need to change on Neurodiversity?

In our modern fast-paced society as it stands a wide range of differences and diversities are actively celebrated and embraced. Culture, gender, religion, sexuality, nationality, religion are seen as active elements of our everyday lives. Society in the modern world is more tolerant, open, and accepting than it has ever been. Surely the question must be asked that Neurodiversity is another aspect of human diversity which should be celebrated and recognised as such.

I remember being diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome a form of autism when I was just 10 in 1995. Back then diagnosis of neurodiverse differences were very much in their infancy. Now what we are seeing is that a growing percentage of the population in modern countries are receiving diagnosis and labels of various differences and disabilities and as a consequence many are being categorised as 'neurodivergent'.

It is estimated that 15-20% of the global population is neurodiverse

10% of the global population are Dyslexic

3% have Dyspraxia

1.1 have autism

However, as a note of caution this data doesn't necessarily factor in comorbidity which is where a person may have multiple neurodiverse differences. However, since I was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome in the 1990's the criterion for acquiring a diagnosis to state you are neurodivergent has changed significantly. There is a case to argue that just because a person doesn't get a successful diagnosis to state that they are neurodivergent doesn't necessarily mean that they aren't.

Yet, it can also be argued that labelling and categorising people often has the negative effect of marginalising them in society. Labels and diagnostic criteria as it pertains to neurodiversity can have a substantially damaging impact on an individual. Instead, we should be focusing on the skills and strengths and positive attributes of each person who is neurodivergent and not see them as a label but as a unique individual who can play their part in a society that actively celebrates and embraces them for who they are not what we perceive them to be.

Why Neurodivergent people want to work?

Many people see work as a means to an end. Yet, imagine as a neurodivergent individual that you have fought for years just to access the labour market. For you as that person, access to the labour market, will mean a whole lot more than someone who has perennially been in employment. Some of the benefits of employment for a person who is neurodivergent but not limited to will include:

- Financial independence and security
- Improved quality of life
- Increased self-esteem and confidence
- Improved mental and physical well-being
- Improved social skills.

Yet, sadly for many neurodivergent people access to employment and the means to be successful in the workplace are often more of a dream than a reality.

- 21% of people with autism are in fulltime employment.
- 40 % of people with autism have never worked. This is despite 77% saying they want to work.
- 48% of people with autism have experienced some form of booking or harassment in the workplace due to their autism.
- 4 out of 10 people unemployed people are dyslexic.
- 85% of people with Asperger's syndrome are thought to be unemployed. This is despite many having above average intelligence.

The benefits of hiring neurodiverse talent in the workplace



Employment estimates on those who are neurodivergent seem to wildly differ. Yet, there is a general consensus that globally 10-20% of the world's population could be classed as neurodivergent. It is simply not enough for employers to state that neurodiversity does not exist. However, time and time again many neurodivergent individuals report having experienced considerable workplace difficulties owing to their differences. These difficulties in the workplace have included but are not limited to :

- Employers lacking the confidence and knowledge about neurodiversity in the workplace.
- Inappropriate reasonable adjustments.
- Reasonable adjustments not implemented at all during their employment with the organisation.
- Workplace bullying.
- Lack of training and knowledge of neurodiversity by the employer.

Employers need to realise that hiring neurodivergent talent into their workplaces isn't a corporate social responsibility tick box exercise but in fact it makes good business sense to hire innovative and creative minds into the workplace. As such employers must meet specific legal requirements. In the UK the Equality Act 2010 means that those with disabilities are protected from discrimination. If organisations breach this legislation they can face legal action being taken against them if they fail to meet the needs of neurodivergent employees. Furthermore, the business case for hiring neurodivergent talent, places a substantial emphasis upon organisations harnessing the strengths and skills of neurodivergent talent. Thus, in effect creating a wider talent pool for organisations to recruit from. In effect leading to a broader customer base, greater organisational allyship, greater client affiliation with the company and a more positive image of the organisation. Organisations are now also realising that teams in the workplace are not just built upon uniformity and similar attributes and that greater diversity is needed. Research shows that the best teams in organisations are those that are comprised of different strengths and talents. Furthermore, a diverse workforce provides a diversity of thought, which results in greater creativity and innovation. Simply put those who are neurodivergent think and interpret information differently. Neurodiversity is a difference in

the hardwiring of the brain. So, as such a neuro-diverse team is the chances are more likely to see issues from a different angle to their neurotypical counterparts. In the last decade we have seen that the tech industry in Silicon Valley has realised the considerable potential that hiring neurodivergent talent can bring to their workplace. Now more than ever other organisations and industries are realising the benefits of hiring neurodivergent talent and are following suit. Similarly, many industries and organisations are facing a skills shortage and are struggling to fill roles specific skill sets. At the same time many neurodivergent people with the necessary skill sets are unemployed or in jobs that aren't reflective of their true abilities. Many neurodivergent individuals don't struggle with the actual job or the knowledge required to be successful. It is more a case that they struggle with a lack of knowledge and awareness of neurodiversity in the workplace, a lack of reasonable adjustments or support from other team members or a lack of knowledge in being able to navigate the complexities of office politics are often their undoing in the workplace. What many organisations fail to comprehend is that reasonable adjustments such as incandescent desk lamps or fixed desk arrangements are inexpensive and easy to implement. It must also be mentioned that organisations that place an emphasis upon inclusion, acceptance and an understanding of neurodiversity invariably have higher retention rates of neurodivergent talent as a consequence. This is because when neurodivergent employees feel valued and respected for their skills and knowledge they are far more likely to be productive, satisfied and stay in a role longer.

Neurodivergent Recruitment

For those who are neurodivergent the recruitment process can be a minefield which many struggle to navigate successfully. Difficulties for those who are neurodivergent during the recruitment process can include but are not limited to:

- Poorly worded job adverts that discourage neurodivergent applicants from applying.
- Lack of self-confidence to apply for jobs, perhaps owing to previous negative employment experiences.
- Fear of rejection by employers who lack the knowledge and understanding of neurodiversity in the workplace.
- Fear of disclosure of their differences, might mean instant removal from the recruitment process.
- Fear of questions being asked about gaps in their CV.
- Fear of not being able to do so called simple tasks within the job, even if they are capable of doing the vast majority of the role.
- A fear that employers will see them as the label and the disability and not as an individual who can add value to their workplace.
- Lack of interview experience and inability to sell themselves at interview to get the role.
- Slower processing speeds with information.
- Difficulty in social situations, such as making eye contact with the interviewers.
- Difficulties with the social aspects of interviews such as lunch breaks and group tasks.

As we mentioned this list is not exhaustive and different neurodivergent individuals experiences will greatly differ on a person-by-person basis.

The Employee Lifecycle Process



Our Advice:

- Provide clear and concise information on what the job looks like.
- Only include tasks relevant to the role. Remove generic tasks.
- Actively state that you encourage neurodivergent applicants to apply.
- Use clear, direct language in any job application that you post. Avoid jargon and be explicit on the tasks and responsibilities of the role.
- Think carefully about the role in question and ensure that skills are not placed in the essential category when they should be desirable.
- Be openminded as an organisation when looking to fill roles, don't just look for generalists for roles as this may exclude or discourage neurodivergent applicants from applying for roles in your organisation.
- Ensure that the job description is an accurate day-day reflection of what is expected from the role.
- State what the working conditions and environment look like. Adding a description of what that looks like is likely to encourage more neurodivergent applicants to apply for roles within your organisation.
- Clearly state that your organisation offers reasonable adjustments.
- If your organisation has a diversity and inclusion programme mention this on-the-job application.
- If your organisation has achieved any recognition for disability awards or neurodiversity specific achievements. State this on the application.
- At interview keep questions clear and simple
- Use plain English
- Ensure a structured interview and if interview assessments are included as part of the interview state this prior to the interview.

- Ensure if required that the applicant has extra time for the interview assessment if they require it.
- Ensure that the interview assessment is relevant to the role that the neurodivergent applicant will be doing if successful.
- Make sure that the hiring managers and recruiters have a good working knowledge and understanding of Neurodiversity. Any hiring managers and recruiters must have neurodiversity training before being able to interview neurodivergent applicants.
- Avoid asking questions about gaps in a neurodivergent person's CV.
- Consider alternative types of interview. Perhaps a problem-solving interview.
- Don't be offended if a neurodivergent candidate struggles to make eye contact with you. They might be uncomfortable in new and unfamiliar environments.
- Prior to interview have an initial call with the neurodivergent applicant to understand what support they will need on the day.
- Provide a map and contact information on how to get to your offices.
- If there are group tasks as part of the interview process. Consider putting the neurodivergent applicant into smaller groups where they will feel less overwhelmed in a new and unfamiliar environment.
- Manage the sensory environment. Ensure that the interview is held in a quiet room with incandescent lighting where possible.
- Consider if timed tests are really necessary for the role. Remember these tests can often be more about processing speed than skills and competency.
- Always provide the right reasonable adjustments that a neurodivergent applicant has requested.
- Consider giving out interview questions to neurodivergent applicants in advance, so they know what to expect on the day.
- Factor in slower processing speeds when answering questions.
- Allow neurodivergent candidates to look at any prepared notes that they might have brought along to the interview.
- If pre-reading materials are given out prior to interview. Ensure that they are printed clearly and are well-spaced out.
- If chosen as a successful candidate, consider a tour of your offices prior to the commencement of employment.
- Discuss reasonable adjustments and working environments requirements prior to start date.
- (If consented to) share diagnosis with immediate team and wider organisation.
- Ensure that they meet their colleagues and managers prior to commencement of employment.
- Assign a workplace buddy if required to help support them during the first few months of the job.
- Provide a clear explanation if necessary of the unwritten, unspoken social rules of the workplace.
- Ensure that structured workplace reviews are implemented from the beginning of their employment.
- Provide an induction pack with policies, procedures and contact details.
- Allow time for questions to be asked during the induction process.

Useful Resources

ADHD UK

ADHD UK | ADHD UK

Ayoa

What is Neurodiversity - Ayoa's Assistive Technology

Autism Alliance

<https://www.autism-alliance.org.uk/>

Autism Education Trust

<https://www.autismeducationtrust.org.uk/>

British Dyslexia Association

British Dyslexia Association (bdadyslexia.org.uk)

Dyspraxia Foundation

Home (dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk)

Mencap

<https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/conditions/autism-and-aspergers-syndrome>

NHS

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/>

The National Autistic Society

<https://www.autism.org.uk/about/what-is/asd.aspx>

An Adult with an Autism Diagnosis: A Guide for the Newly Diagnosed – Gillian Drew

Connecting with the Autism Spectrum: How to talk, How to Listen, and Why You Should not Call It High-Functioning – Casey Remrov Vormer

Divergent Mind: Thriving in a World That Wasn't Designed for You – Jenara Nerenberg

Adult Dyslexia: Unleashing your Limitless Power – Cheryl Isaacs

We are Not Broken: Changing the Autism Conversation – Eric Garcia

Autism Working: A Seven-Stage Plan to Thriving at Work – Michelle Garnett & Tony Attwood

NeuroTribes: The legacy of Autism and How to Think Smarter About People Who Think Differently – Steve Silberman

Living with Dyspraxia: A Guide for Adults with Developmental Dyspraxia – Revised Edition – Mary Colley



"Tapping The Hidden Talent Pool"

