How can managers support neurodiversity in the workplace?

Neurodiverse employees can be an asset to any workplace, improving productivity (Austin, 2017), undertaking unpopular or difficult tasks, and helping to foster a sense of inclusion and equality (Bruyère & Colella, 2022). The organisational conditions under which the unique talents of neurodiverse people can be leveraged are highly achievable and will be outlined in this paper.

Communication allowances

Even occupations that require minimal social interaction rely heavily on communication between employees and managers to facilitate work. Differences in communication styles sometimes lead to misunderstandings, and these incidents can be all too common among neurodiverse employees. Managers should be mindful of two things when communicating with neurodiverse individuals:

1.“Benefit of the doubt”: Neurodiverse people, particularly those with ASD, can have a different way of expressing themselves. Although their body language, tone, or demeanour may come across as unfriendly or inappropriate, it is beneficial to reserve judgements based on non-verbal cues, as these can be easily misinterpreted (Silberry, 2020).

2. Clarity is key: Do not rely on metaphor, sarcasm, or jargon to communicate an important piece of information to a neurodiverse employee. While less exact, more colloquial language may be welcome at other times. Employees that experience comprehension difficulties benefit from clarity when discussing deadlines, meeting dates, and other important instructions (Bruyère & Colella, 2022).

Stimulation control

A neurotypical person may have a hard time understanding why neurodiverse individuals react adversely to the same stimuli that they themselves find neutral or even pleasant. A quintessential example of this is hugging, with some people with ASD finding the sensation of being hugged by another person overwhelming and unpleasant (Volkmar et al., 2014). There are some simple adjustments that can can be made to improve the sensory experience of the office environment.

1. Localise distractions: People with sensory issues have difficulty self-regulating their response to stimuli (Millichap, 2001). Instead of 'tuning out' distracting sensory information, they must often move away from it. Therefore, it is beneficial to designate certain areas for concentration, wherein there are few distractions, and locate more stimulating situations (such as workplace parties, lunch groups, television screens, loudspeakers) elsewhere. In this way, employees may move between areas based on whether they feel under-stimulated or over-stimulated.

2. Allow for workspace adjustments: The office is often a highly regulated environment, with spoken and unspoken rules surrounding the placement of desks, allowed decorations, and the right (or lack thereof) to personal space (Richards et al., 2019).

Research suggests that all employees, not just neurodivergent ones, are more productive when they have the freedom to adjust their workspaces and decide whether to occupy a more private cubicle-type office or an open-plan space (Muzaffar et al., 2020). It can be speculated, however, that this freedom is particularly important for neurodivergent employees as it presents them with the opportunity to limit distractions and reduce the emotional labour inherent in unexpected social interactions (Bruyère & Colella, 2022).

3. Allow for personal adjustments: Auditory stimuli can be just as distracting as visual stimuli. A simple but effective way for those who struggle with auditory overstimulation or under-stimulation to manage noise input, is for them to wear headphones (Nadeau, 1997). Managers may have to overcome their own reluctance to allow this practice, as the wearing of headphones is negatively associated with social norms of openness, diligence, and deference. It is therefore worthwhile to note that neurodivergent individuals request to wear headphones out of medical necessity, rather than a desire to ignore their social responsibilities within the workplace (Austin, 2017, Bruyère & Colella, 2022).

Time and date keeping

Organisations must ensure work is completed within a certain timeframe, and a great deal of a manager's work involves encouraging the necessary expediency in their team. Such expediency often relies heavily upon the working memory to act upon several details at one time. For example, employees working on a project might consider: 1) x project is due at y time, 2) tasks a, b, and c, must be completed in sequence and within a timeframe before x project can be completed, and 3) my colleagues and manager must be informed of progress upon completion of each task or by z time, whichever comes first, 4) there is a meeting at n time every day which I must attend. While some neurodiverse individuals excel at processing tasks; those that require what might be called 'mental bandwidth', many struggle at this. As a supplement, they need external reminders of the information that they are expected to hold in mind (Townsend, 2019). The following practical adjustments function to do just this:

1. **Have a whiteboard,** or other easily accessible display showing the date and time when meetings are to occur, projects are due, or any other important chronological detail – however obvious it may seem. Ensure this display is situated adjacent to a clock which is legible at a distance (Bruyère & Colella, 2022).

2. **Encourage employees to keep a calendar** on their work computer or phone that alerts them to imminent events. Coaching may be necessary to educate employees on how to work calendar software, but this software is a highly useful tool provided employees are willing/able to enter information regarding their commitments in advance.

3. **Assist employees in breaking large tasks down into smaller components.** Not just neurodivergent employees feel a sense of overwhelm when confronted with a task so large there seems no obvious place to start. Developing a series of small tasks that make up the whole may also reduce the negative emotions associated with getting started on something, which in turn may serve to reduce procrastination (Reardon, 2021).

Adjustments to routine

Consistent routine can be a welcome practice for neurodivergent employees, as it provides a sense of stability and the opportunity to prepare for stressful situations long before they arise (Bruyère & Colella, 2022). On the other hand, complete inflexibility can be a hindrance to these same individuals in cases where a slight adjustment can be made (see below for examples), but are denied due to managerial or organisational rigidity. Managers should be mindful to maintain schedule predictability without sacrificing flexibility. The following points identify areas where managers might provide flexibility:

1. Work submission deadlines: Research suggests that the stress levels of neurodivergent individuals is reduced when small extensions are provided to submission deadlines (Clouder et al., 2020). In circumstances where an extension is both possible and warranted, grant an extension to the deadline and also consider providing support in the form of planning strategies such as that described in point 3 under the heading 'Time and date keeping'.

2. Accessibility of meeting materials and instructions: Neurodivergent individuals often struggle with note-taking, and benefit from being able to access meeting materials both in advance of a meeting to prime them for discussion and afterwards to serve as a reminder. Consider ways to increase the ease with which important materials can be accessed, for example by moving physical papers online.

3. Team and group work requirements: Neurodivergent individuals can flourish in a group environment (Clouder et al., 2020), however, it is impossible to predict the circumstances in which such a heterogeneous population will succeed. Where possible, allow neurodivergent employees to opt-in and opt-out of group work depending on their enthusiasm for this activity.

4. Transitioning to new objectives: An effect known as 'attention residue' makes rapidly switching between tasks difficult. Information regarding a previous task must be 'cleared' from the mind before another task can be effectively undertaken, and this clearing takes time (Leroy, 2009). Neurodiverse people may struggle to an even greater extent with attentional residue, with the tendency to lock their attention on one task for a long period of time, representing both a strength and a weakness of this population (Harris et al., 2020).

The following points identify areas where managers should seek to maintain routine:

1. **Expected hours in the office:** If a significant project will soon be underway and overtime may be required, warn employees in advance, to allow those who will be unable to adjust, a chance to inform their manager. Similarly, increases from part-time to full-time and decreases from full-time to part-time should be arranged with consideration to the work life balance of employees.

2. **Occupancy of office space** (i.e. Who sits where): Ensure employees know which offices are occupied by which managers, and (where possible) maintain regular seating arrangements for employees so that employees sit in the same spaces each day and have the same 'neighbours'.

Provide support

Providing adequate support structures is perhaps the most important accommodation an organisation can make to improve the well-being and productivity of its neurodiverse employees. Managers should consider the following suggestions with regard to the provision of workplace support:

1. **Make disclosure beneficial**: Neurodiverse employees weigh up the pros and cons of disclosing their diagnosis, and many chose not to (Bruyère & Colella, 2022). Without voluntary disclosure, managers are severely limited in their ability to identify and service the needs of their neurodiverse employees. Therefore, every effort should be made to ensure employees understand the benefits of disclosure, and understand that no action will be taken against their employment or advancement, due to their diagnosis.

2. **Provide independent support systems:** Even under a neurodiverse workplace climate, neurodiverse employees may not feel comfortable speaking about their difficulties to someone with whom they work with closely. Rather than expect neurodivergent employees to make themselves vulnerable and invite judgement from those they work for or with, managers should provide the contact information/office location of a counselling or HR department which can administer informed support and relief to the employee (Bruyère & Colella, 2022).

References

Austin, R. (2017). Neurodiversity Is a Competitive-Advantage. Harvard Business Review, 93–103.

BruyèreS. M., & Colella, A. (2022). Neurodiversity in the workplace : interests, issues, and opportunities. Routledge.

Clouder, L., Karakus, M., Cinotti, A., Ferreyra, M. V., Fierros, G. A., & Rojo, P. (2020). Neurodiversity in higher education: a narrative synthesis. Higher Education. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10734-020-00513-6

Harris, C., Van Der Vloodt, R., & Maddocks, J. (2020). Championing neurodiversity and Emotional Intelligence in the workplace. Executive Resilience Coaching. https://static1.squarespace.com/static/51853c4fe4b065e39b41dd04/t/5f3a8ec2209dd66c2ac887ef/1597673171059/ERC-Neurodiversity-White-Paper-160320.pdf

Leroy, S. (2009). Why is it so hard to do my work? The challenge of attention residue when switching between work tasks. Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes, 109(2), 168–181. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2009.04.002

Millichap, J. G. (2001). Sensory Modulation Dysfunction in ADHD. Pediatric Neurology Briefs, 15(7), 54. https://doi.org/10.15844/pedneurbriefs-15-7-7

Muzaffar, A., Noor, P. N., Mahmud, A., & Mohamed Noor, N. (2020). A Comparative Study on The Impacts of Open Plan and Closed Office Layout Towards Employees Perceived Productivity. Jurnal Penyelidikan Sains Sosial, 3(6), 49–58.

Nadeau, K. G. (1997). ADD in the Workplace: Choices, Changes, and Challenges. Brunner/Mazel, Inc., Taylor & Francis Group, Frost Road, Suite 101, Bristol.

Reardon, K. (2021). How to Make Sense of Procrastination. The Family Institute; Northwestern University. https://www.family-institute.org/sites/default/files/reardon-how-make-sense-procrastination.pdf

Silberry, A. (2020). Diversity, Difference or Disorder? Exploring neurodiversity in police-community partnerships [Doctoral Dissertation].

Townsend, A. (2019). Executive dysfunction in ADHD. Psych Science, 2(3).

Volkmar, F. R., Rogers, S. J., Paul, R., & Kevin Archer Pelphrey. (2014). Handbook of autism and pervasive developmental disorders volume 2 : assessment, interventions, and policy. John Wiley & Sons.

How can managers spotlight neurodiverse strengths?

Research suggests that focusing on the strengths of neurodiverse employees can increase their well-being as well as productivity (Naples & Tuckwiller, 2021). This document will outline some strengths that neurodiverse people (e.g. with ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, ASD, or intellectual conditions), have been shown to display and which neurodiverse workplace policies can expect to accentuate. The following points of strength may pertain to one or multiple neurodiverse conditions, however they have not been organised based on condition as the very high (generally >50%) comorbidity rate of these conditions would make such separation inaccurate. A neurodiverse employee that has one neurological condition can be expected to have other conditions, and therefore any combination of the strengths listed below.

1. They have an interest in valuable and difficult types of work

The RIASEC model is a categorisation system for occupations. Lorenz and Heinitz (2014) found that people with Asperger's syndrome were more interested in Conventional and Investigative types of work, which relate to scientific, analytic work and highly directed, organisational tasks, respectively.

This means that individuals with Asperger's syndrome are likely to thrive in a workplace that requires systemic, detail-oriented jobs and deductive reasoning tasks.

2. They think outside the box

Numerous researchers have noted the ability of individuals with a variety of neurodiverse conditions to develop novel solutions to problems (e.g. Armstrong, 2010, Leroux & Levitt-Perlman, 2000, Trott, 2015). This 'out of the box' thinking can take the form of self-developed strategies to cope with personal weaknesses that also function to allow for a more open-minded approach to problems (Armstrong, 2010). An example might be breaking a problem down into workable components, or reconceptualising a problem as a mathematical argument.

3. They have great long-term memories

'Savantism' is a term used to describe the tendency of individuals on the autism spectrum to demonstrate one or more skills in which they are a 'savant'; an outstanding expert (Cambridge Strategy Group, 2021).

Photographic or an otherwise exceptional long-term memory is a more common savant skill among people with ASD, however to focus on such exceptional cases is to miss the nuance that an above-average long-term memory is associated with the group at large (see Trott, 2015 for review). Indeed, workplaces have reported the ability of people with ASD to recall details (Austin, 2017), and there is evidence to suggest that ASD, ADHD, and dyslexic individuals may supplement perceived deficits in working memory by systemising long-term memories with greater efficiency (Armstrong, 2010).

4. They think differently

White and Shah (2006) suggested that individuals with ADHD struggle with convergent thinking but have a distinct advantage in divergent thinking. Convergent thinking is the ability to associate different concepts to form a solution, while divergent thinking is the ability to quickly generate multiple solutions to a problem, often including solutions which are overlooked by convergent thinkers. Further, research suggests that dyslexic people are more commonly visual thinkers, who learn and problem-solve best by visualising a task (Trott, 2015), and people with ASD demonstrate enhanced perceptual functioning, excelling at visual tasks involving pattern recognition and object discrimination (Mottron et al., 2006).

Finally, according to Trott (2015), people with Asperger's syndrome possess great deductive reasoning abilities, and due to this logical thinking style are excellent at mathematical problems.

5. They are energetic

Due to dopamine regulation issues, people with ADHD can struggle with motivating themselves to focus on a task. However, when people with this condition do focus they can concentrate much more intensely than a neurotypical person. This state has been called 'hyperfocus', referring to periods of extreme fixation on a task coupled with exclusion of environmental stimuli (White & Shah, 2006). Indeed, occasions in which the ADHD employee struggles with a dearth of motivation to engage with work may be entirely counterbalanced by times when this person displays great energy; working harder, faster, and for longer (Leroux & Levitt-Perlman, 2000).

6. They are creative

People with ADHD have a well-documented advantage in creativity (eg. (Abraham et al., 2006, Boot et al., 2017, Boot et al., 2017b, Ten et al., 2020, White & Shah, 2006). Trott (2015) suggested that this group is superior at generating original ideas, an asset to any workplace but particularly fast-paced professions where novel solutions to problems are in order.

7. They are hardworking

It is not surprising that employed neurodivergent individuals, who have necessarily overcome barriers within a system of education and employment generally designed for neurotypicals, are extremely hardworking. This trait has been remarked upon by a few works (Armstrong, 2010, Austin, 2017, Trott, 2015), and is a neurodivergent strength not to be overlooked. In an employee, determination and a willingness to learn can make up for a variety of deficits, but a deficit in determination cannot be resolved by strengths elsewhere.

References

Abraham, A., Windmann, S., Siefen, R., Daum, I., & Güntürkün, O. (2006). Creative Thinking in Adolescents with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Child Neuropsychology, 12(2), 111–123. https://doi.org/10.1080/09297040500320691

Armstrong, T. (2010). Neurodiversity : discovering the extraordinary gifts of autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other brain differences. Da Capo Lifelong.

Austin, R. (2017). Neurodiversity Is a Competitive-Advantage. Harvard Business Review, 93–103.

Boot, N., Nevicka, B., & Baas, M. (2017a). Subclinical symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) are associated with specific creative processes. Personality and Individual Differences, 114, 73–81. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.03.050

Boot, N., Nevicka, B., & Baas, M. (2017b). Creativity in ADHD: Goal-Directed Motivation and Domain Specificity. Journal of Attention Disorders, 24(13), 1857–1866. https://doi.org/10.1177/1087054717727352

Cambridge Strategy Group. (2021, June 14). Harnessing neurodiversity to enhance strategic decision making in your firm. Cambridge Strategy Group. https://www.camstrategy.com/2021/06/14/harnessing-neurodiversity-to-enhance-strategic-decision-making-in-your-firm/

Grove, M., Croft, T., Kyle, J., & Lawson, D. (2015). Transitions in undergraduate mathematics education. The University Of Birmingham.

Chapter 15: The neurodiverse mathematics student by Clare Trott

Leroux, J. A., & Levitt-Perlman, M. (2000). The gifted child with attention deficit disorder:An identification and intervention challenge. Roeper Review, 22(3), 171–176. https://doi.org/10.1080/02783190009554028

Lorenz, T., & Heinitz, K. (2014). Aspergers – Different, Not Less: Occupational Strengths and Job Interests of Individuals with Asperger's Syndrome. PLoS ONE, 9(6), e100358. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0100358

Mottron, L., Dawson, M., Soulières, I., Hubert, B., & Burack, J. (2006). Enhanced Perceptual Functioning in Autism: An Update, and Eight Principles of Autistic Perception. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 36(1), 27–43. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-005-0040-7

Naples, L., & Tuckwiller, E. (2021). Taking Students on a Strengths Safari: A Multidimensional Pilot Study of School-Based Wellbeing for Young Neurodiverse Children. Public Health Special Issue: Psychoeducational Interventions to Promote Mental Health and Wellbeing through Covitality and Socio-Emotional Skills in Children & Adolescents, 18(13), 6947.

Ten, W., Tseng, C.-C., Chiang, Y.-S., Wu, C.-L., & Chen, H.-C. (2020). Creativity in children with ADHD: Effects of medication and comparisons with normal peers. Psychiatry Research, 284, 112680. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2019.112680

White, H. A., & Shah, P. (2006). Uninhibited imaginations: Creativity in adults with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder. Personality and Individual Differences, 40(6), 1121–1131. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2005.11.007