# **Embracing Neurodiversity in the Skilled Trades**

## New Perspectives for the Energy Sector

Every day, we are reminded that the world is a swiftly changing place.

The energy sector has always been at the forefront of this constantly evolving landscape. Driving these changes, both in a conceptual sense and in a very literal sense, are the millions of scientists, engineers, technicians, and skilled tradesmen that comprise one of the most indispensable sectors of our modern economy.

Innovation is at the heart of this constant march forward. Creativity, ingenuity, and an ability to think creatively have always been key attributes in an industry tasked with powering contemporary society. These human qualities are taking on a whole new level of importance as the industry faces down the challenges of evolving energy needs. The incredible human mind is our greatest tool for overcoming the complex and multifaceted obstacles the energy sector is tasked with solving.

This is precisely why there is a fundamental and urgent need to adopt a new perspective when it comes to embracing neurodiversity in the workplace. From the boardroom to the lab, from the engineer to the maintenance worker, neurodivergent individuals *already* contribute to, and strengthen, the sector at every level.

Imagine the potential that could be tapped into if the industry actively embraced the power of an openly neurodiverse workforce!

## **Misconceptions About Neurodiversity in the Workplace**

Diversity, inclusion, and accommodations are buzzwords that have been making the rounds in recent decades. By now, most organizations are aware that talent is not limited by race, gender, age, physical ability, sexual orientation, or social class. Unfortunately, most workplaces have not figured out how to include *neurodivergent* people on that list.

According to a recent study done by the Institute of Leadership and Management, about *half* of all business leaders and managers surveyed were *unwilling* to hire workers with a neurodivergent condition. When it comes to the skilled trade industries, *only 26%* of neurodivergent workers are willing to openly reveal a diagnosis.(*Workplace Neurodiversity: The Power of Difference Part 1: Lived Experiences of Neurodivergents*, 2020)

Neurodivergent conditions such as ADHD, dyslexia, OCD, and autism, are commonly judged to be disabilities. Unfortunately, many people in decision-making positions are still unaware of the inherent strengths and talents neurodivergent employees can offer to the workplace.

Many misconceptions about neurodivergence continue to exist, such as:

* Neurodivergent individuals are mentally ill.
* They are harder to train and require more supervision.
* They are not as smart as neurotypical workers.
* They have poor social and communication skills.
* They are not capable of meeting deadlines, performing job duties, or learning new skills.

While these may be issues that certain neurodivergent individuals face, as stereotypes they create an unfortunate obstacle and do a disservice to the industry (and an entire community).

Neurodivergence is not confined to stereotypes, labels, or any given diagnosis. It cannot always be identified by physical characteristics or mental capabilities. To shift the perspective about neurodiversity in the workplace, it is necessary to challenge those stereotypes, and open our minds to the reality that a neurodiverse workforce is an *advantage* for both industry and society.

Whether you know it or not, chances are *you already have a neurodiverse workforce*. Unfortunately, because of a lack of inclusivity and workplace cultures tainted by misconceptions, many neurodivergent workers choose to hide their cognitive differences.

Considering that neurodiversity is just another facet of human nature, why not embrace it? Better yet, why not encourage inclusion and celebrate divergent thinkers as assets to the industry?

## **How Divergent Thinkers Benefit the Energy Sector**

As I mentioned, the energy sector is one where innovative and out-of-the-box thinking can, and does, change the world.

So, why not seek out workers who see the world from a different perspective?

While it is true that some neurodivergent workers may struggle with social norms, they may also have the capability to hyperfocus, problem solve, think critically, and work under pressure.

In fact, certain diagnoses can indicate specific strengths that a neurodivergent person may have.

Individuals on the autism spectrum are often values-driven, being exceptionally honest and full of integrity. They can work independently, are known for being creative problem-solvers, and are blessed with incredible observational skills. They are known for their analytical thinking and tend to be strong visual learners.

People with ADHD are blessed with good memory and observational skills, they have an intense energy that can be applied to complete urgent tasks. They are typically persistent and enthusiastic in their problem-solving.

Those with Dyslexia tend to be excellent verbal communicators and strong visual or mechanical thinkers. Often, their spatial intelligence is off the charts, which is a huge bonus on construction sites. Other divergent thinkers may contribute to the workforce with their enhanced memory, holistic ways of thinking, and well-developed self-control.

## **Embracing Neurodiversity in the Workforce**

1. ***Update recruitment and hiring processes.*** Review company procedures to make sure they do not unintentionally discriminate against neurodivergent individuals.
2. ***Expand apprenticeship programs and increase opportunities for hands-on training and skill development.*** Create the talent you need, in-house, through expanded educational opportunities.
3. ***Implement mentoring and coaching in the workplace.*** Embrace a company culture that offers a positive, supportive environment that allows workers to successfully develop into their roles.
4. ***Review company processes for accessibility.*** Review training materials, handbooks, policy statements, etc., to make sure they cover a diversity of learning preferences.
5. ***Implement company-wide training and awareness programs specifically addressing neurodiversity in the workplace.*** Get your neurotypical workers on-board with your neurodiversity initiatives through appropriate education and awareness training.
6. ***Create meaningful accommodations that consider individual workers, the work environment, and workplace culture.***Work with each neurodivergent thinker on your team to create accommodations that help them do their job to the best of their ability. Then ask yourself, “Will those accommodations benefit neurotypical workers or divergent thinkers who have not disclosed their condition?” If so, improve the workplace environment by expanding those accommodations to all workers.

I invite you to expand upon each of these points with further research. While they may seem like big changes, most of them require little more than minor adjustments in mindset and policy to implement.

## **Divergent Thinkers: An Untapped Resource**

The statistics are disheartening for neurodivergents, especially autistics. If you look at the autism community specifically, only about 32% of adults with a diagnosis on the spectrum can count on paid employment. Of them, only about 16% have full-time jobs.

Those are the stats from just *one segment* of the neurodivergent community. If you consider the wide array of divergent thinkers that exist in the world (including those without a formal diagnosis) you’ll discover an enormous talent pool that is being underutilized. With a few simple changes in company policy and culture, businesses and organizations across the entire energy sector can benefit from this untapped human resource.

Now is the time to take advantage of the natural talents divergent thinkers have to offer. In an industry where ingenuity and creativity drive success, why not set stereotypes aside and welcome neurodivergent thinkers onto your team?

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Susan Fitzell, M. Ed, CSP, is a nationally recognized presenter, author of nine books for teachers, trainers, and parents, an educational consultant, and CEO of Aim Hi Educational Programs, LLC. As an independent consultant and coach, Susan offers the personalization, continuity, and consistency necessary for true change in any organization. She works side by side with teachers, school administrators, and business leaders as a coach and trainer, employing Brain Power strategies that take learning to the next level.

For more information, visit Susan's website at www.susanfitzell.com.