# **Get Better Results by Tapping into the Neurodiversity Talent Pool**

## Reframing Biases That Cause You to Get What You Expect

Everybody varies a little from the definition of the ‘standard’ human. Some of us are tall. Some of us are short. Some of us are right handed. Some of us are left-handed (unless you are a baby boomer and went to Catholic school). Do those things really matter? Not really. It gets more complicated, however, when we factor in cultural differences and distinct ways of doing things.

Every manager or business owner knows they need to look past superficial differences and concentrate on choosing the right people for the right job.

There is a lot written about the importance of diversity these days, but only recently has diversity in cognition — or *neurodiversity* — come to the fore of our awareness. Fueled by research that indicates neurodiversity can help close skill gaps in our teams, there is a lot of interest in broadening our sense of what “diversity” looks like. When we view the status quo from a contrarian lens, we may find that we hire people who support our paradigm, unintentionally creating skill gaps that rob our workforce of productivity.

According to a study written by Nancy Doyle and published in the [British Medical Bulletin](https://academic.oup.com/bmb/article/135/1/108/5913187?login=false) in September 2020, up to 20% of the world’s population is estimated to be neurodivergent. Many divergent thinkers are never diagnosed, and many more simply learn to “mask” their divergent thinking by training themselves to adapt to cultural norms.

# **Neurodiversity: Opportunities for People to Think Differently**

The word ‘neuro’ refers to the nerves transmitting electrochemical signals through our bodies and brains. These signals regulate our neurological processing, patterns of thought, and behavior, which are deeply influenced by and embedded into our collective culture. However, from time to time, [unusual, diverse patterns](https://www.brainandspine.org.uk/information-and-support/what-is-a-neurological-problem/) of processing emerge, creating neurodiversity in human society.

This diversity provides the freedom from which creative people operate in every sphere of life, as they shrug off ‘the usual way of doing things’ and find new ways to achieve their objectives. In the workplace, it is easy to accept their slightly ‘left of center’ behavior when they increase the productivity of the team.

However, neurodiversity sometimes reveals itself in differences that go beyond the reach of socially ‘normal’. When unconventional behavior presents itself, people get confined into tidy boxes that help a neurotypical society “deal with” their differences. These boxes are often labeled dyslexia, autism, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and dyspraxia. These labels are some of the diagnostic terminology medical professionals use to categorize divergent thinkers so they can get help. Without a diagnosis that appears in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM–5) insurance and other entities won’t pay for or provide supports and services. Consequently, neurodevelopmental differences fall under mental disorders and are stigmatized.

So, the labels are a necessity, especially in the school-age years, for students to get the support they need. Unfortunately, those same labels often condemn neurodivergent individuals to the ‘slow lane of life,’ and that’s not fair or ethical.

In fact, it’s a significant loss to the world, because neurodivergent people [are not intellectually disabled](https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/clearing-up-some-misconceptions-about-neurodiversity/). Sometimes a person will have both neurodivergence as well as an intellectual disability (ID). However, ID is a separate diagnosis. Their thoughts may follow different paths, but this does not diminish their personhood, or their potential to live rich, meaningful lives. Understandably, it can be difficult to see past the surface, or the ‘socially awkward’ behavior of people who learn differently. Nonetheless, that’s exactly what embracing diversity (in all its forms) is about: learning to look past our differences and view them as strengths instead of deficits. Reframing this bias enables us to have a gifts mindset instead of a deficit mindset.

# **Neurodivergence is More Common Than You Think**

For a divergent thinker, it can cut to the bone when an employer tells a team, ‘this is so-and-so, they have autism, so I’d like to ask you to help them along.’ Neurodivergent thinkers are not asking for favors. They certainly don’t want to use the diagnosis that has followed them since childhood to ask for special treatment. They just want to claim their right to reach their full potential in the workforce.

Embracing neurodiversity in the workplace will require some adjustments. The bonus is; if you adopt these adjustments with the mentality that they are for *everybody*, the benefits will be a richer, more productive, and all-around positive experience for the entire workforce. Remember, you are not performing an act of charity when you bring on neurodivergent employees. You are nurturing the depth of talent on your team.

Neurodivergent people, including those with autism and dyslexia, may have special skills in pattern recognition, memory, or mathematics. These strengths help businesses sharpen their problem-solving skills and become more innovative. [The research](https://hbr.org/2017/05/neurodiversity-as-a-competitive-advantage) on successful neurodiverse teams backs this up! Yet, many of them, especially autistics, can only get low-skilled jobs that do not take advantage of their full potential.

Every business is different and there are any variables to consider. However, company culture has a colossal influence on the group dynamics within an organization. Consequently, neurodiversity starts with aligning workplace culture to values that support neurodiversity. To advance a neurodiversity initiative in a company without preparing the culture would be akin to a gardener planting a garden without preparing the soil first.

Here are a few broad principles that provide a starting point to build a work that supports neurodiversity in the workplace.

# **Four Tips for On-Boarding Neurodiverse Workers**

1. ***Accept that inclusion is a two-way street.*** Neurodivergent team members and their neurotypical colleagues need to make complimentary adjustments to their mindset regarding neurodiversity. This is greatly influenced by the onboarding process for all new employees.
2. ***Allow team members to adapt without having to ask.*** Provide noise-canceling headphones, balance balls to sit on, and other sensory objects or accommodations to *all* employees. Don’t force social interactions. Create “chill spaces” that are available to employees throughout the day. Make accommodations freely available to everybody in the workplace to create a productive work environment.
3. ***Be flexible during group sessions.*** In every team, members have different interpersonal skills. They each have their own strategies for influencing group thought. Allow space for everybody to make their unique contribution in a way that is comfortable for them. Allow the use of adaptive technologies such as voice-to-text tools for note-taking or video recording as an alternative to note taking. Permit extra time — interaction is a process and team meetings may take longer.
4. ***Encourage newcomers to share their communication and learning styles with the group.*** Encourage transparency in the workplace through interactive discussion, where everybody naturally exchanges information and gets to know one another for the unique individuals they are. They will naturally grow in their understanding of how best to communicate with their teammates. Things will go easier once they understand the differences and subtle (or not so subtle) nuances of their neurodivergent coworkers.

# **References and Recommended Reading**

**Neurodiversity in the Workplace: Things to Consider Before You Jump On the Bandwagon** by Susan Fitzell. [Downloadable booklet available here](http://neurodiversityatwork.biz/)

**What is a Neurological Problem**, by the Brain & Spine Foundation https://www.brainandspine.org.uk/information-and-support/what-is-a-neurological-problem/

**Clearing Up Some Misconceptions about Neurodiversity.** ( 2019) Bailin, Aiyana. Scientific American. Available online <https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/observations/clearing-up-some-misconceptions-about-neurodiversity/>

**Neurodiversity at work: a biopsychosocial model and the impact on working adults.** (2020) Doyle, N. *British Medical Bulletin*, Volume 135, Issue 1, September 2020, Pages 108–125, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bmb/ldaa021>

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