**HRMs’ Keys to Success for Neurodiversity in the Workplace**

**Top Tips for Employment Equity in the Neurodiversity Space**

There’s a crucial difference between equality and equity in the workplace. This difference represents the evolution in thinking that has taken place in employment as different minorities make themselves heard in the workplace. Consider these definitions:

[**Equality:**](https://www.catalyst.org/2019/05/30/12-diversity-inclusion-terms-you-need-to-know/) Treating everyone the same way, often assuming that everyone starts on an equal footing or with the same opportunities.

[**Equity:**](https://www.catalyst.org/2019/05/30/12-diversity-inclusion-terms-you-need-to-know/) Working toward fair outcomes for people or groups by treating them in ways that address their unique advantages or barriers. (*12 Diversity & Inclusion Terms You Need to Know*, 2019)

I’ve spent my entire career explaining the difference between equality and equity. Add to that the misconceptions about what it means to be fair. What’s fair? What is equal? If some people have poor eyesight and need glasses to see, does fair or equal mean that everyone must wear glasses? You might think this is a ridiculous analogy.

On the contrary, it’s a simple analogy that explains the issue quite well. Provide those who need glasses, with glasses. Those who don’t need glasses would not be forced to wear them. That’s equity.

While measures to work toward fair outcomes based on gender and race have (mostly) come a long way, the same cannot be said for groups in the neurodiversity space. So, what do the phrases “working toward fair outcomes” and “their unique advantages or barriers” mean?

A person’s unique advantages and barriers need to be identified and respected, to work toward fair outcomes. It’s a worldview that encompasses a curiosity and acceptance of the whole human being. Looking at neurodiversity from the point of view of a strengths-based model, consider the following (*What Is Neurodiversity? — Genius Within*, n.d.):

[https://www.geniuswithin.org/what-is-neurodiversity](https://www.geniuswithin.org/what-is-neurodiversity/)

Looks good, right? Depending on your business, at least a few of these advantages are attractive to an employer.

 For example, traditional screening practices value skills that neurotypicals usually possess. These skills include being a team player, good communication skills, confidence, the ability to mirror the interviewer, and most importantly, knowing what not to say. Neurodivergent candidates without these skills may never make it through the first interview phase.

Hiring managers could reverse this trend, create a screening process that values cognitive divergence, and diversify the talent pool. Research has shown that diversity in the workplace is a competitive advantage.

In Malcolm Gladwell’s book “Outliers,” the backstories of geniuses are shared. As a society, we love success stories. It inspires us to believe that anything is possible if we put our mind to it. In truth, modern-day geniuses, tech tycoons, and billionaires often achieved success not only by their wits but because of favorable circumstances. Sometimes, they were in the right place at the right time to take advantage of a life-changing opportunity. Gladwell explains that even birth month and year influence the extent of success — and we aren’t talking astrology here! Aptitude alone is not a predictor of success. Aptitude and favorable circumstances are predictors of success.

The neurodivergent have faced less than ideal circumstances when it comes to employability. The reason might be due to context, environment, and culture. So, let’s explore the role of human resources (HR) in the hiring process, onboarding, and retention.

## **How hiring practices can improve**

Employment equity requires a change in culture and attitudes. This can be achieved by working closely with management to foster collaboration and positive team building.

Imagine an overwhelmed homeowner deciding to grow a garden.  You probably know someone who has done this very thing. I’ll bet something grew: an abundance of weeds. This homeowner didn’t prepare the soil before planting the seeds and consequently, his garden failed. Doesn’t this same thing happen with new initiatives at work, especially diversity initiatives? It’s essential to prepare the soil.

How do we “prepare the soil” for a successful neurodiversity initiative?

1. Include autistic and neurodivergent voices at the table when establishing policies, procedures, and processes. This is a non-negotiable.
2. Consult with *knowledgeable* resources in the area of neurodiversity. Pop culture media is not a credible resource.
3. Create Neurodiverse-friendly recruitment and interview practices.
4. Develop Neurodiverse-friendly support channels to support onboarding and retention.
5. Work toward a workplace culture that normalizes accommodations.
6. Foster a whole-person view of employees.
7. Have dedicated individuals in the HR space who are neurodiversity experts or at least allies.
8. Open dialogue about the competitive advantages that neurodivergents can bring to a company.
9. Reframe neurodivergent ‘eccentricities’ and stereotypes from the negative to the positive.

## **Interview practices**

I’ve interviewed many autistic employees in the process of authoring informed articles. One of them, Maria, was frustrated by her interview experiences. This is her story:

“It’s a mini-performance. It’s like acting for 30 minutes to an hour and hoping I get all the lines right, even when my script doesn’t resonate with me. In all the jobs I’ve interviewed for, it always felt like I had to “act.”

 I would have preferred an opportunity to demonstrate my skills, perhaps using a simulation, a game, or even a case study. Once I landed a job that I wanted. Once I got to work, many of my peers were surprised at the high level of my work. I was even awarded for it. But what I was capable of wasn’t apparent in the interview, as I later found out.

 I would take the entire day off from my current job when interviewing because it was so stressful. I remember migraines after one particular interview. But funnily, that was a job I actually managed to secure.”

As the above demonstrates, many neurodivergents struggle with interviewing procedures. Autistics, for example, struggle with eye contact, have difficulty determining rank and status and are honest to a fault. People with ADHD may miss what the interviewer says because they are worried about what to say next. Dyslexics may perform poorly on interview assessments — not because they don’t have the required skills, but rather because they have difficulty reading text, especially under pressure.

[Specialsterne, an internationally recognized company that supports autistic and neurodivergent people in gaining meaningful employment, creates low-pressure settings called “hangouts”](https://hbr.org/2017/05/neurodiversity-as-a-competitive-advantage) where candidates have the opportunity to show their skills, aptitudes, and preferences in an environment that is less like a performance and more like playing or “messing around.” This is much more conducive to showing what a neurodivergent person can do. And in many ways, it’s a more honest way of interaction and assessment. Specialsterne then shortlists a few candidates from the hangout session and proceeds with further (non-traditional) assessment activities that start out “game-like” and move toward the kind of work that the successful candidate will do (Austin & Pisano, 2017a).

A study co-authored by Margaret Neale at Stanford Graduate School of Business found unconscious bias that favored neurotypical candidates over neurodivergent applicants:

“As a result of our tendency to be swayed by displays of overt confidence, we may be reinforcing an already unfair social hierarchy. When overconfident people from upper-class backgrounds walk into a job interview or are vying for a leadership role, they have an immediate advantage, the researchers say. We can’t help but fall for their bravado, endowing them with greater talent and skills than they in fact possess.”

Overconfidence is usually not something neurodivergents possess, so there’s an inherent disadvantage there. Further, in this[fascinating (and amusing) article on the effectiveness of traditional interviews](https://www.inc.com/jessica-stillman/yale-researcher-to-bosses-science-proves-job-interviews-are-useless.html), Jessica Stillman shines a light on why clinging to these practices is illogical and not in an employer’s best interests. Interviewing methods could benefit from a revamp, and by doing so, become more inclusive to the neurodivergent candidate.

## **Neurodivergent employee support after hiring**

After hiring, continued interest from HR can go a long way toward ensuring that neurodivergent employees can perform at their best. It’s important to stay in touch and check in with employees after onboarding. When the employee is autistic, or otherwise neurodivergent, these check-ins are critical.

Neurodivergent people are dynamic creatures, like everyone else, and their needs can vary as time passes. For example,  T[his is quite common with female autistics, who mask more than men, and in more elaborate ways, especially if the environment isn’t inclusive](https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5509825/) (Hull et al., 2017)

 That’s a high price to pay for both the employer and the employee. However, companies can mitigate this risk by showing honest and sincere interest in the success of the employee.

When keeping in touch with neurodivergent employees, be straightforward and avoid subtext, nuances, and unspoken social cues.

Malcolm Gladwell shared an alarming conclusion from an air crash investigation in his book “Outliers.” A startling percentage of air crashes happened because of mitigation. Mitigation is a style of communication that’s “softened” to show deference to a person who is, or who is perceived to be, higher in rank. Co-pilots seemed to resort to this kind of speech when speaking to the captain, tempering an urgent request, even in emergencies.

Communication characterized by these traits is difficult for the neurodivergent. Most autistics are very literal. They don’t understand nuance or sarcasm. This is often true of other neurodivergent thinkers, too. In addition, an autistic employee may err by being too direct with peers and supervisors.

I understand this pain. I am a neurodivergent who is  Some people love this about me. In other cases, it’s created conflict not only in the workplace but in personal relationships. It’s been a lifelong battle.

Neurodivergent employees may not notice subtle cues used by others in their attempt to soften criticism. These communication differences often lead to misunderstanding and consequently, instructions may not be followed.

## **How Approachable is HR?**

It’s critical to make sure it’s[safe for neurodivergent employees to approach HR](https://medium.com/the-learning-strategist-iq/creating-safe-spaces-for-neurodivergence-in-the-workplace-1e5888cdc42f?sk=666b87255f63cf41fb1297d635969f9a). When a person is having an issue at work, it’s often after much angst and deliberation that they find their way to HR to get help. It’s even more difficult for the neurodivergents who don’t want to be labeled “needy,” whiny, attention-seeking, or worse by their colleagues. Again, a solid practice is for HR to take the initiative to schedule regular check-ins to allow neurodivergent employees to share how things are going without fear of repercussions.

## **Normalize accommodations**

Pre-2019, work-from-home arrangements were the exception, not the norm. The world has flipped since then, and work from home has become the norm for many professions. Can we extend the benefits of remote work for the greater good?

Pre-pandemic, managers were groomed to assure compliance to standards by having employees onsite and visible. Now, we have almost two years of experience managing employees remotely. By doing so, companies were able to adjust work and environments to meet individual needs. The cost of doing so is usually minimal, and the payoff, much more significant.

Some quick-win accommodations to consider:

* Be flexible about how employees manage their sensory needs. If someone needs to sit in a dimly lit work area, use noise-canceling headphones, or wear more comfortable clothing, to be more productive, that’s a win!
* Be flexible about communication preferences. As noted above, communication can make or break an individual or team’s success. Often, neurodivergents are labeled as hard to communicate with or hard to read. Perhaps this is so if only one style of communication is “allowed.”

*For example, an autistic colleague of mine, Sandra, a freelancer, had a client who insisted on using email to track work. The “who-said-what-and-when” problem arose many times. When Sandra suggested Google Docs as a collaboration tool, the idea was rejected. The client demanded that email be used, and changes be denoted in different colored text. Each collaborator used a different color. This cumbersome approach didn’t work either, and, consequently, misunderstandings continued.*

*A project that could have been completed quickly with multiple collaborators failed because of the clients’ unwillingness to be flexible in how changes were communicated. When working with neurodivergents (and neurotypical employees), consider tapping into the abundance of tools available to streamline and track communications. This approach can benefit everyone, not just divergent thinkers.*

*This next suggestion may present some challenges in implementation, however, moving toward flexibility in work hours can help neurodivergents avoid anxiety. The boon is that it may help all employees make the best use of time in their workday. Some people work best in the evening, some in the early morning, and some in a typical 9–5 schedule. There are times where flexible hours are impractical, however, when companies are communicating with vendors or teammates all over the world, the 9–5 days are often impractical.*

## **Take a whole-person view of employees**

“Neurodiversity programs induce companies and their leaders to adopt a style of management that emphasizes placing each person in a context that maximizes her or his contributions.” ~ Austin and Pisano, Harvard Business Review (Austin & Pisano, 2017b)

Why take the time to do this? For some neurodivergent employees, it absolutely will take time. I understand that’s one of the objections. Here’s a fact: Whether we are neurotypical or atypical, how our individual brains work defines who we are. Living things flourish when placed in a context that’s best for their individual makeup.

I mentioned the time it can take to consider individual employees. One of my clients retorted, “You can’t do that for 4000 employees!”

I realize that employers need to make a profit. Time is money. Yet, the pursuit of profit can cause organizations to ignore the human need to be treated humanely, with consideration, and care. This outdated hardline approach to managing by the numbers is most likely fueling the “great resignation” we are seeing in the United States. Dismissing the needs, goals, and concerns of one’s employees is costing companies more in turnover and the substantial loss of corporate knowledge. A profit-first approach is no longer sustainable. Everyone has something, some quirk, which makes them a little different. Not accommodating these differences and screening out those deemed “different” prevents a company from innovating and growing.

## **Don’t rely on pop culture for knowledge of the Neurodivergent**

Everyone hates being stereotyped, and the lesser-known a minority group is, the more damage a stereotype can do. Stereotypes make for great entertainment to the detriment of society. Unfortunately, we see media depictions of minority groups as reality. Most of this conditioning of our attitudes and beliefs regarding minorities is subconscious.

The entertainment world knows exactly how to play into human psychology to win over viewers and increase profits. Consider that “The Big Bang Theory’’ was a hugely successful show depicting an autistic Sheldon Cooper. For years viewers were fed a steady diet of stereotypes about autists, nerds, geeks, and neurodivergents for the sole purpose of getting laughs and gaining viewers.

How do we undo our reliance on pop culture to reshape our views of neurodivergents? Manny, one of my clients with ADHD, explained, “Let’s start here; neurotypes aren’t adjectives. Saying that you ‘feel bipolar today’ or that you’re ‘being so ADD’ or saying, ‘he’s so OCD’ isn’t ok.”

Autistics aren’t all mathematical savants and geeks. They aren’t all male. And most autistics will state that they don’t want to be “fixed.” References to Rain-Man, Sheldon Cooper, or Dr. Shaun Murphy aren’t ok. Making assumptions about how Tourette’s Syndrome manifests or using the word “bipolar” to describe bad behavior isn’t appropriate.

Worse still is infantilizing the neurodivergent because of assumptions based on these pop culture depictions. Neurodivergent people are tired of chanting, “Not all of us are like that!” Purging the pop culture depiction of neurodiversity in corporate culture is an essential early step for HR to enact. The best strategy? Get a go-to-person.

## **Neurodivergent experts in the HR space — get a go-to person**

A go-to person (or a few) should ideally be a neurodivergent person from within or associated with the company or organization. This is crucial because neurodivergent employees are fed up with neurotypical people speaking for them, and justifiably so.

This person can serve as an ally or neutral third party when matters get prickly, allowing the employees to feel more comfortable expressing themselves. In addition, HR and management can consult with the go-to person to bounce off ideas and get a sanity check for how the company handles matters related to neurodivergent employees.

## **A final message to HR from a neurodivergent employee**

Neurodivergent people have spent a large part of their lives coming up with an array of ways to cope with the challenges they face. Many have used their challenges and coping mechanisms to their advantage — though this isn’t the norm. The fact that neurodivergents are successful demonstrates at least four things:

(1) They have creativity, (2) work hard, (3) demonstrate tenacity, and (4) foster innovation.

Traditional interview techniques favor those who interview well. They are overconfident about their abilities and know-how to schmooze the interviewer. These same interview techniques and unwritten “rules” systematically filter out neurodivergent candidates. These individuals may not tick the expected boxes, but they will be able to add new boxes — honesty, hard work, out-of-the-box thinking, and much more.

We are living in a world where diversity exists in all areas of life. Diversity can be a significant strengthening factor — think of biodiversity, cultural diversity, racial diversity, and even gut microbial diversity. All these areas benefit from the differences at play. Therefore, if businesses are to flourish, neurodiversity and the values that come with it are impossible to ignore.

*12 Diversity & Inclusion Terms You Need to Know*. (2019). Catalyst Blog. <https://www.catalyst.org/2019/05/30/12-diversity-inclusion-terms-you-need-to-know/>

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*What is Neurodiversity? — Genius Within*. (n.d.). Genus Within Website. Retrieved November 18, 2021, from <https://www.geniuswithin.org/what-is-neurodiversity/>

## **Definitions:**

[**A neurodevelopmental condition**](https://adhdaware.org.uk/what-is-adhd/neurodiversity-and-other-conditions/): [sic] its symptoms, behaviors and traits are the result of a person’s brain developing differently during the key stages of development before they were born or as a very young child. This differs from mental illness, which refers to patterns of behavior where a person experiences a ‘state of mind’ that is different from their ‘normal self.’ Some examples are: ADHD, ADD, Autism, Tourette’s, and Speech and Language disorders

[**“Masking and camouflaging**](https://opendoorstherapy.com/autism-and-trauma-masking/) are terms used to describe neurodiverse individuals who seek to hide or minimize their autism traits to fit in with the neurotypical world. ”

[**Autist:**](https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Autist)Urban dictionary, “Has contemporary usage as a self-identifier and a term of endearment used online by individuals who self-identify as non-neurotypical.”

*The following definitions were created by Nick Walker, of neurocosmopolitanism.com:*

**Neurodiversity** is the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species.

**Neurodivergent**, sometimes abbreviated as **ND**, means having a brain that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of “normal.”

**Neurotypical**, often abbreviated as **NT**, means having a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of “normal.”

*You might also see or hear the terms:*

**Neurodivergents,**People who identify as neurodivergent

[**Neurominority,** any group, such as people with autism\*, which differs from the majority of a population in terms of behavioral traits and brain function](https://www.collinsdictionary.com/us/dictionary/english/neurominority)

\*preferred language … such as autistic people, which…

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