**Neurodiversity at Work: How to Promote Inclusivity**

**And Avoid Stigma, Labels and Discrimination**

Fostering diversity and promoting inclusion is an essential component of organizational culture. Most of us are familiar with diversity in gender, race, and physical disabilities. When I mention neurodiversity to people, most often the response is a puzzled look and a question.

“What is neurodiversity? I’ve not heard that term before.”

Neurodiversity is diversity of cognition: neurological differences in how the brain functions. Stated in plain language: Differences in how people think, process information, and communicate. Current interest in increasing innovation and problem solving on teams has this topic trending upwards. Research on neurodiversity initiatives is showing them to be successful.

Inclusion of divergent thinkers is an area that is crucial for conversation. This is because, without thoughtful implementation, the results can be devastating for both companies and individuals.. Some neurodivergent employees have already been casualties of good intentions in companies that have not carefully implemented these initiatives.

The reality is that most companies have neurodivergent thinkers already in their ranks. The overwhelming majority of those employees are in hiding. They are invisible and unlabeled.

## Understanding the Difference Between Diagnostic Labels and Stereotypes

Autism, ADHD, and Dyslexia are the most common forms of neurodivergence. Yet, Tourette’s syndrome, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, Epilepsy, and Dysgraphia are also forms of neurodivergence.

Consider that popular culture, through music, film, and social media has created a romanticized view of autistic people. Examples include Sheldon Cooper — Big Bang Theory, Max Braverman — Parenthood, Shaun — The Good Doctor, Sam — Atypical, and[Adam Raki](https://the-art-of-autism.com/a-review-of-the-movie-adam-now-streaming-on-netflix-and-amazon/). What’s key is that the diagnostic label does not represent the entirety of a person’s personality and abilities. Because of this, it’s important to not make assumptions based on stereotypes.

Neurotypical (NT) is a term coined to represent the opposite of neurodivergent (ND). Because of misinformation and/or conflicting information about neurocognitive differences, neurotypical people might draw incorrect conclusions about how to accommodate neurodivergent peers. Conclusions are often based on minimal knowledge gleaned from entertainment stereotypes.

No two ND persons are the same. Some people are complex and have more than one variant of neurocognitive functioning.

## Approaches to Avoid Stigma and Labeling of Neurodivergent Employees

It follows that true inclusivity is not achieved through a ‘one size fits all’ approach. Rather than consider a job prospects’ specialization and skills, employers are often quick to dismiss their candidacy because of their social challenges.

Neurodivergent thinkers are often labeled as ‘disabled’ when, in fact, their abilities are only limited in certain areas. A better term might be ‘differently-abled’.

On the job, NDs often tend to rely on coping mechanisms they’ve learned over their lifetime. They use what they’ve learned to avoid the stigma and discrimination of coworkers. When they pull this off, their difference is invisible. It’s a hidden diversity. The downside is that they often hide their brilliance in the process. They fear their unorthodox solutions and creative ideas will be rejected. Or, they already have been. The take-away is to understand that neurodivergence exists in your company already.

Seven out of ten neurodivergent workers have faced discrimination in the workplace. Seventy-three percent do not disclose their condition or diagnostic labels because of their fear of discrimination.[(The Westminster AchieveAbility Commission for Dyslexia and Neurodivergence, Neurodiverse voices 2018).](https://www.achieveability.org.uk/files/1516612947/wac-neurodiverse-voices-opening-doors-to-employment-report_2018_interactive.pdf)

Yet, JPMorgan, Google, SAP, Ford, and Ultranauts are trailblazers of the corporate inclusion of neurodiversity. James Mahoney, Executive Director and Head of Autism at Work for JPMorgan Chase said in an official statement, ‘Many autistic people are simply brilliant people — highly educated, highly capable, detail-oriented, yet unemployed,’ adding, ‘I firmly believe that companies could always benefit from having employees who see things in an unconventional way, which is something to remember any time an individual on the spectrum is seeking a job.’

## Neurodiversity and Discrimination in the Workplace

Although well intentioned, some team leaders may, intentionally or not, base their decisions and accommodations on assumptions and stereotypes fueled by popular culture.

Consequently, attempts to support neurodivergent employees may not be what the individual needs to function at optimal productivity. In some cases, uninformed attempts to support divergent thinkers may even be considered discriminatory.

Discrimination in the workplace may occur directly or indirectly and may lead to harassment and victimization. Direct discrimination is when a neurodivergent person gets treated negatively compared to other workers. Indirect discrimination is when a policy or practice presented as neutral puts neurodivergent employees at a disadvantage.

When the needs of these employees are not given proper consideration, indirect discrimination occurs. Examples include:

1. Not making accessibility options available during presentations or meetings.
2. Refusing a request to provide a quiet, distraction free space to work in a department that has an open office environment.
3. Dismissing ND’s concerns about privacy, security, or anxiety by insisting on the status quo.

Discrimination may take the form of harassment. For example, when colleagues violate the ND worker’s dignity, are hostile, degrading, or offensive towards the ND individual.

Thomas Armstrong, author of, “The Power of Neurodiversity”, maintains that employers unintentionally exclude or discard notable talent in neurodivergent people. Stereotypes and stigma surrounding neurodivergence create more limitations than the divergent cognitive function.

## Educate Yourself and Your Employees.

Some of the best ways to avoid stigma while implementing neurodiversity at work include:

* Take time to research all types of neurodivergence.
* Learn the appropriate terms and context of use, to avoid indirect labeling or discrimination at work.
* Consult with experts in the field of neurodivergence when establishing procedures and promoting inclusive culture. Ask what works and what doesn’t work.
* Establish protocols for communication that foster psychological safety for all employees, including neurodiverse teams.

[At Ultranauts, a software testing company, new employees, whether neurodivergent or neurotypical, are provided with a BioDeck, which is a guide to the rest of the team.](https://medium.com/@canvas8/brand-insight-ultra-testing-careers-workplace-1b580d058249) The BioDeck contains twenty-eight data points on each individual, including their preferred communication channels.

This approach honors neurodiversity, prevents indirect discrimination, and encourages every new employee to feel recognized and supported by the company without setting anyone up for discrimination.

## Provide Training and Experiences with Neurodiversity

Ensure that recruiters, interviewers, and human resources personnel get appropriate “neurodiversity” training. There are nuances we must understand when working with ND’s that are not included in most diversity courses. It’s important to understand how literal ND’s may be (so don’t expect that they’ll understand sarcasm). Learn about appropriate accommodations and options for effective, and flexible communication. Remember to look beyond the social constructs to the skill and benefit this hire would provide the organization.

Training should equip leaders to identify and address any issues that may occur within the organization that impact their ND colleagues.

# Conclusion

There’s more to success than the obvious physical accommodations necessary to support a neurodiversity initiative. It’s essential to create a psychologically safe environment for neurodiversity to flourish. It is possible for organizations to promote neurodiversity and inclusivity if they recognize and address the negative impact of stigma, labeling, and discrimination when these issues occur.

Accommodating differences, celebrating abilities, and enhancing diversified teams is key to achieving collective success.

# Sources

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## **Definitions as Referenced in this Article:**

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.”

[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…[Susan A. Fitzel](https://susanfitzell.medium.com/?source=post_sidebar--------------------------post_sidebar-----------)l

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