**Seven Ways You Can Support Neurodiversity in the Workplace**

**Let’s go beyond the theory and talk steps you can take**

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Here are seven great ideas that you might incorporate into your company’s processes, norms, or culture to increase the success of your neurodiversity initiative.

### **#1 Seek out expert advice**

Hiring neurodivergent employees, especially autistic individuals, is a terrific first step. Understanding how best to work with them is another story.

If you don’t have anyone on your team who is neurodivergent, seek out experts and educational materials to learn more about how to help your employees succeed. If at all possible, include experts that are actually autistic or neurodivergent because those are the people who truly understand what’s needed.

Realize, however, that no two neurodivergents are exactly alike. You may want to have more than one expert to consult with and then decide what processes to put into place. For example, two autistic experts may have completely different opinions on something as basic as what language to use. Some prefer identity-first language, while others prefer person-centered language. You’ll have to decide what is best for your company.

### **#2 Remember that autistic people don’t want to be “cured”**

Many autistic people are proud of their neurodivergence and see no reason to cure themselves of their symptoms.

As an employer, it’s important to understand why they are unique and take steps to include them in your business without attempting to eliminate behaviors that you may find undesirable. Instead, ask yourself if the behavior that you or their team members find bothersome is hindering their ability to do a quality job for the skill they were hired for. If not, accommodate. If it’s preventing them from doing the job they were hired for, then work with them collaboratively to find solutions.

For example, if you hired a person because of their outstanding expertise in coding and they are excelling at that part of their job, don’t penalize them if they can’t stand up and deliver a presentation in a cogent fashion. That’s not what you hired the person for. People who are extremely talented in a specific area are typically not generalists. To expect them to be is naïve.

### **#3 Good for all, critical for people who are neurodivergent**

Autistic people often have unique communication styles. If you favor their style of communication over a neurotypical style of communication it can alienate your team. Instead, offer several options for communication. Those options may include using apps like Slack, Microsoft teams, chat, email, zoom, or good old-fashioned phone calls.

Providing a variety of options accommodates all your employees even though those options are critical for people who are neurodivergent. Your dyslexic team member may prefer zoom, Teams video, or phone rather than written communication. Providing options supports that neurodivergence also.

### **#4 Encourage understanding**

Over-stimulation is a known trigger for many autistic people, making office banter, sarcasm, or harassment difficult and (sometimes unbearable) to cope with. Have a zero-tolerance policy in place to ensure your business is a safe and welcoming environment for autistic people. Again, a policy such as this benefits everyone. Not only do people who are neurodivergent often struggle with these negative, yet often accepted, behaviors, employees who have a history of being marginalized, abused, or put down for their learning difficulties will also benefit from an environment that is psychologically safe. This need is not exclusive to people who are autistic. The need for a psychologically safe working environment is applicable to all employees.

### **#5 Appreciate weird ideas**

The day you have zero weird ideas is probably going to be a bad one for your company. Don’t immediately throw out ideas because they seem strange. Your team may have just come up with something brilliant.

This may require a culture shift in your company or on specific teams. As a neurodivergent myself, I cannot tell you how many times my weird idea was put down, dismissed, or laughed at publicly in the workplace or on board meetings where I’ve been a member. When that happened, I learned very quickly to stop contributing my ideas.

A few years ago, A former supervisor who had angrily rebutted one of my ideas for helping the company to be more successful told me, on his way out the door of that same company, “I remember when you suggested that we do x y and z to get ahead of our competition. I disagreed with you then. I now realize you were right.” Sadly, his realization came way too late for the employees and for the company. They lost their window of opportunity to stay ahead of the trend that would deeply and negatively impact their company’s success.

### **#6 Understand that each employee is an individual**

While there are some commonalities among autistic people, these individuals are quite diverse and cannot be characterized in any one meaningful way. Each person, whether neurodivergent or neurotypical, is different with his or her own strengths and weaknesses. When we lump people into stereotypical categories, we do our employees and our company an incredible disservice.

### **#7 Create a clear career path**

Many autistic people struggle with transitions and can become confused or frustrated when tasked with responsibilities outside their comfort zone. Many don’t deal well If they’re assigned to do a project that does not have clear instructions and timelines. Some employees, whether autistic, neurodivergent, or neurotypical, may want to map out their projects or tasks and get feedback or approval before they continue.

Although it may seem supportive to tell them you have confidence in them and you don’t need to approve their plan of action before they start, that might backfire. They may need reassurance that they’re on the right track before they continue. To not have that reassurance may cause great anxiety. If they highly value efficiency, they may also feel that they could be wasting their time because they don’t know for certain if their work is going to meet expectations.

### Conclusion

Once you, and your company, have learned to embrace and practice these ideas, you will be on your way to being more successful, with better retention, more productivity, and a happier work environment for all employees.

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