**Six Steps to Make Your Team More Innovative with Neurodiversity in the Workplace**

In the modern workplace, where team-based and project-based work are more popular than ever, companies must find ways to retain their employees. Losing employees is expensive and retention of talent allows companies to better compete against others who may be trying to poach them.

According to the SHRM Employee Job Satisfaction and Engagement report, 77% of employees reported that relationships with co-workers impacted their work engagement. 74% reported that relationships with their immediate supervisor impacted their engagement and job satisfaction. (Employee Job Satisfaction, 2016) One way to do this is by making teams as inclusive as possible and creating an environment where everyone can feel like they belong.

### **An often overlooked component of organizational loyalty is cognitive diversity**

How well does your company deal with employees who divert from the social norm? Is your company culture one where employees with neurocognitive differences feel they have to hide who and what they are because their brains are wired differently? Who is hiding in your midst? Employees who may be hiding who they really are include those with ADHD, dyslexia, autistic spectrum disorders, Tourette syndrome, and others.

At one time, these differences were viewed as disorders. Now, these conditions are recognized for what they are: differences in brain function that can be highly beneficial for some professions.

For example, individuals with dyslexia or other reading-related disorders might find it difficult to focus on detail-oriented tasks such as memorizing specific rules and processes that are needed in law school. Yet, given the right support during onboarding and training, they can excel at tasks requiring creativity, lateral thinking, and project management.

Neurodivergent individuals are an untapped talent pool. By recruiting them and championing their strengths, companies can grow employee retention, improve teamwork, and boost innovation.

Businesses who welcome neurodiversity in the workplace find they are more likely to retain high-performing employees who possess these unique skill sets.

### **Why do workplaces need neurodivergent individuals?**

There are as many variations in brains as there are human beings. Every single one of us is unique! Each one of us sees, hears, experiences, and responds differently to input and stimuli than our neighbor. It doesn’t matter who that neighbor is or what that neighbor believes. Neurodivergent individuals bring a unique perspective and skill set to every workplace.

The world is changing, and it’s forcing us to rethink our industrial-age business paradigms. Jobs today demand flexibility and innovation. Employees who can successfully complete their tasks need to be able to use a variety of methods and innovative problem-solving skills. An employee with a neurologically atypical mind, that does not get stuck in status quo or “we’ve always done it this way before” thinking, is a huge benefit to companies today.

Recent data from companies accessing autistic and neurodivergent talent note that these employees are hard-working, talented, and loyal.

According to recent studies, including a groundwork by Amy Wrzesniewski, a sociologist at Yale University, having a diverse set of minds working together can greatly enhance innovation within an organization.

This is not only true for tech startups, but also for established companies who strive to continually improve their products and services. A few industries that definitely benefit from neurodiversity are medicine, education, psychology, engineering, and computer science.

## **Six tips for helping neurodivergent people thrive on your team**

#1 Provide quiet spaces. Autistic employees enjoy having a designated space that allows them to focus and work on projects without interruption.

That said, all employees benefit from access to quiet spaces. A good example of this concept is many recently remodeled airport lounges. Many of them have a quiet room where people are not allowed to talk on their cell phones or have conversations with other members.

Not only will autistic employees appreciate the space, so will your introverts or other employees that need quiet to focus. It’s a win-win for everyone.

#2 Offer flexible work hours. Employees will typically take advantage of flexible work hours when offered, as long as they trust that managers won’t judge them unfairly for taking advantage of these policies.

A flexible work schedule not only supports neurodivergent employees with Autism or ADHD, It would support families that need that flexibility to care for children, people who are night owls and not at their best in the morning, and people who hyperfocus and may work a 12 to 14 hour day and need to rest part of the next day. This is a policy change that benefits all your employees. It is critical, however, for the success of some.

#3 Conduct training by design. Training and other options for professional development should be tailored to reflect the diverse needs of employees in order for them to take full advantage of available resources. So often, companies provide a one-size-fits-all training format. Unfortunately, one-size-fits-all leaves many capable, talented, divergent learners at a disadvantage.

Worse is the trend toward computerized assessments that determine whether an employee has mastered a topic. There are employees who have a depth of knowledge about a topic and can utilize their knowledge successfully on the factory floor, in sales, and in conversations with key stakeholders. However, put a standardized, computerized, test in front of them and they will fail. It is the wrong way to assess these individuals’ understanding and knowledge of any topic.

The convenience of digital testing to determine whether an employee “knows their stuff” ignores current research about how brains learn and demonstrate knowledge.

#4 Encourage self-advocacy. People with neurocognitive differences may feel intimidated about speaking up about things that affect them. Provide a safe way for all employees to voice concerns so issues can be addressed effectively, ensuring your organization runs smoothly.

#5 Be aware of stereotypes. A misunderstanding surrounding an autistic person’s capabilities can lead to managerial expectations that negatively influence performance rating results. Keep tabs on productivity and performance ratings so biases don’t creep in unwittingly.

#6 Learn how your employees prefer to communicate. Do they prefer email? Telephone? Text messaging? Apps like Slack, Asana, or other tech options for communication? It’s important to establish a channel of communication that is comfortable for all employees and team members.

### **Conclusion**

Learning how to work with people who are different from each other can help managers to create a better environment in which all employees can thrive. When we learn how to include everyone and foster unique ideas, our teams are better equipped for success and innovation.

So what are you waiting for? Get out there and build a diverse, creative workplace!

### References:

Employee Job Satisfaction. (2016). SHRM Research Spotlight: Employee Job Satisfaction and Engagement. www.shrm.org/research

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