



Neurodiversity: the little-known superpower

How understanding
neurodiversity can help
companies thrive in this
ever-evolving world.

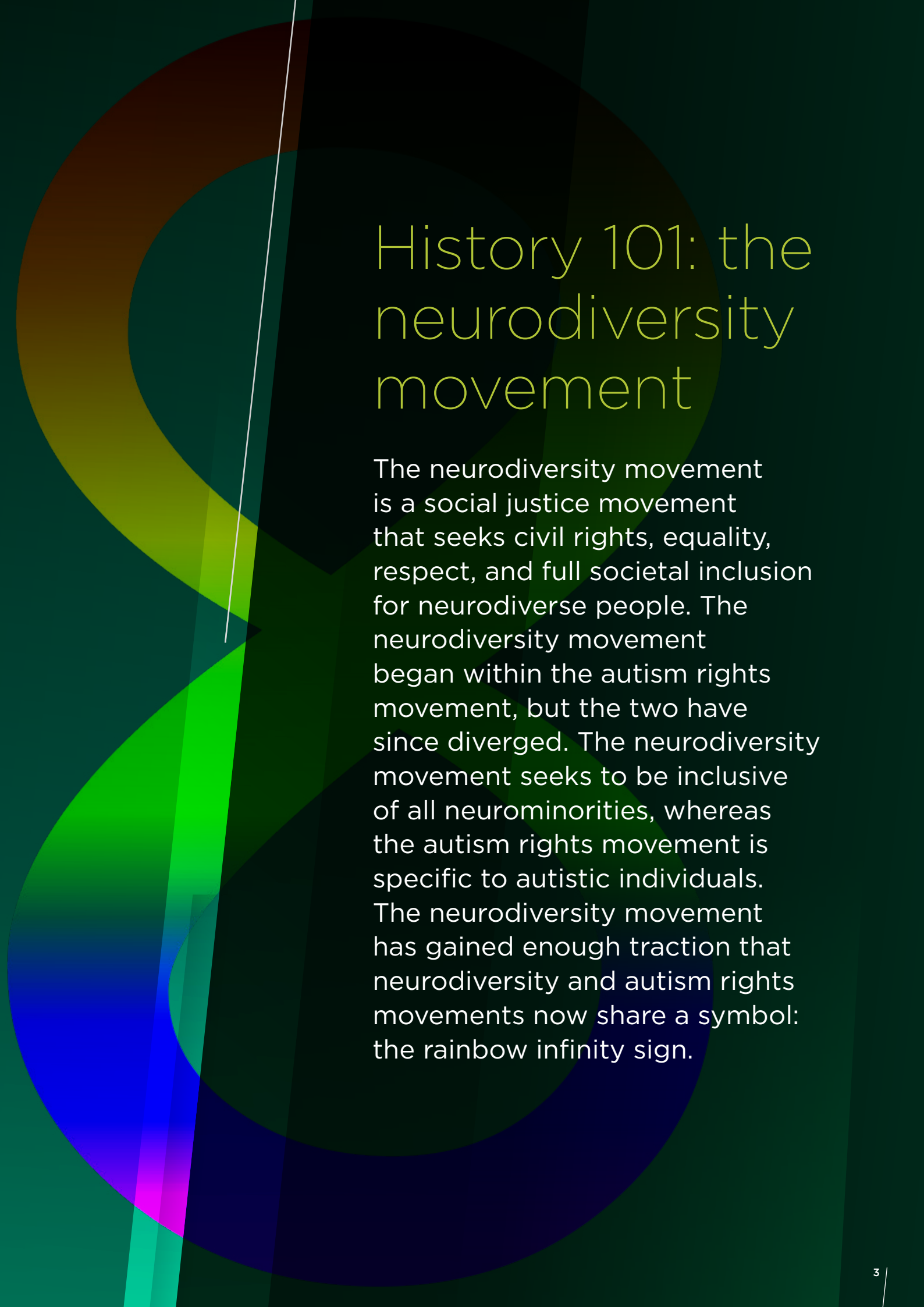
Whether you know it or not, there is a good chance that you work with someone who is neurodiverse.

Neurodiverse people represent roughly 20% of the population, cutting across race, gender, age, and sexual orientation. Yet, despite this large representation, neurodiverse talent face barriers to full and meaningful employment. In the United States, for example, roughly 29% of people with cognitive disabilities—including neurodiverse people—were employed in 2018, regardless of education level, according to federal statistics. In other words, neurodiverse people make up one of the largest underrepresented groups in the workplace.

But for many people, the term neurodiversity is new or unfamiliar. Rather than being understood as inherent problems or disorders, neurodiversity is about the way different people see, feel, and experience the world as a result of atypical neurological structure, connectivity, and function. It is simply the result of differences in genes and their expressions—the result of the same kinds of factors that determine how tall you'll be.

Neurodiversity may be the little-known superpower that companies can use to thrive in this ever-evolving world. Many companies have prioritized recruiting neurodiverse talent and have been rewarded with increased innovation, improved communication, and widespread feelings of psychological safety. When organizations support neurodiversity, they open the door for people who experience the world—its problems and its solutions—differently, to make a difference.





History 101: the neurodiversity movement

The neurodiversity movement is a social justice movement that seeks civil rights, equality, respect, and full societal inclusion for neurodiverse people. The neurodiversity movement began within the autism rights movement, but the two have since diverged. The neurodiversity movement seeks to be inclusive of all neurominorities, whereas the autism rights movement is specific to autistic individuals. The neurodiversity movement has gained enough traction that neurodiversity and autism rights movements now share a symbol: the rainbow infinity sign.

Celebrating the many manifestations of difference

The neurodiversity movement is a critical part of the continued effort to bring diversity, equity, inclusion, and accommodation in our organizations and institutions.

And, like other efforts to support diversity in the workforce, companies that have developed neurodiversity programs or consciously included and accommodated neurodiverse people have found that the benefits are far-reaching—even affecting the bottom line. The neurodiversity movement is also about the ways in which organizations are missing out by overlooking neurodiverse candidates.

The term neurodiversity is, by default, broad; there are so many ways that genes can be expressed that diverge from what is considered “normal”. However, the term typically refers to a range of clinically defined differences. Most commonly, neurodiversity is used to refer to autism, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). However, some use the term more broadly to include other neurologically correlated clinical conditions, such as personality disorders and social anxiety disorders.

The neurodiversity movement, alongside many disability movements for that matter, advocates that these differences do not equal inability to perform, to participate, or to contribute to work and society. The goal of the neurodiversity movement is to include neurodiverse people as part of our cultures and communities, provide structures that support them, and celebrate the valuable traits and strengths of individuals.

Neurodiversity does not simply mean “diversity of thought.” Although neurodiverse people may think differently, neurodiversity is about understanding that differences in the structure, connectivity, and function of people’s brains are natural. Neurodiversity is unique and highly personal and, understanding neurodiversity on a high level cannot—and does not—represent the inherent individuality of neurodiverse experiences.





Neurodiversity: the little-known superpower

SAP is one example of a company that has implemented a neurodiversity program and seen considerable reward for doing so. EY and P&G are two others that have, in recent years, emphasized recruitment and support of neurodiverse talent.

Bank of America underscores the importance, not just of hiring new neurodiverse talent, but of recognizing and supporting the neurodiverse talent that is already at work in the organization. Given the population prevalence of dyslexia alone, it is more than likely that neurodiversity exists within your company. One benefit of neurodiversity programs is that they can push a company and its leaders to adopt practices, policies, and management styles that focus on placing people in contexts that best leverage their abilities to maximize their contributions. The benefits of our neurodiverse hires spread beyond new hires, creating space for everyone to bring their whole selves to work and be their best selves once they get there.

Employees of JPMorgan Chase's Autism at Work program are reported to be 48% faster and as much as 92% more productive than their peers, perhaps due to their strong visual acuity, superior ability to concentrate, and high attention to detail. What's more, these programs have several knock-on effects: improved communication and fostering broad feelings of belonging, equity, and psychological safety—not just among neurodiverse employees, but across the entire workforce.

Neurodiverse talent faces systematic barriers and discrimination at work

Roughly 1% of the population is autistic. Up to 2% of the population has ADHD. As much as 20% of the population is dyslexic. Exact estimates of the prevalence of neurodiversity are complicated by a number of factors, from nondisclosure to biases in diagnosis. However, these estimates still provide a useful anchor for understanding the pervasive nature of neurodiversity in the population.

Despite its prevalence, neurodiversity is often under-recognized and under-represented in the workplace.

Neurodiverse people often encounter barriers and discrimination in the workforce. Specifically, they face high levels of unemployment, underemployment, and undue discipline.

Often, these adverse outcomes are not a result of ability or performance, but rather perceived poor cultural fit or lack of adherence to social norms, according to neurodiversity advocates. Even when fully employed, research shows that neurodiverse adults, on average, are paid significantly less than adults without a reported disability.

The behaviors of neurodiverse people can run counter to what is typically considered the makings of a “good employee”—emotional intelligence, gregariousness, persuasiveness, strong communication, and networking skills, to name a few. Adults with ADHD, for example, are 18 times more likely to be disciplined at work for perceived behavior problems, such as fleeting attention span, long periods of intense focus, and difficulty managing time and paperwork; they are also 60% more likely to lose their jobs. Some neurodiverse people, especially those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), face significant challenges interviewing: they can be overly honest about weaknesses, get off on conversational tangents, and avoid eye contact. And many hiring managers at large companies expect candidates to conform to societal norms and expectations regarding apparel, appearance, and behavior—hiring biases that other diverse candidates encounter as well.

These reinforced norms often cause neurodiverse people to mask their differences—that is, mimic neurotypical behaviors in social



settings. This includes forcing themselves to make eye contact during conversations, imitating body language and facial expressions, ignoring sensory discomfort, rehearsing responses, scripting conversations, disguising stimming behaviors, or keeping their leg from bouncing under their desk. Because neurodiversity may not be accepted or fully understood, neurodiverse people use this masking strategy to feel safe, avoid stigma, feel a sense of belonging, or avoid being “outed” at work. But masking takes an incredible amount of effort and energy. It is a constant exercise in self-awareness and self-regulation, which requires a vast amount of cognitive and emotional resources. Any time someone is not able to be integrated and authentic, whether at work or in social settings, it requires a lot of extra energy that could be better used to accomplish goals. And this takes a mental and physical toll: studies show masking can lead to increased stress and anxiety (Cage & Troxell-Whitman, 2019), depression (Cage, Di Monaco, & Newell, 2018), delayed diagnosis (Bargiela, Steward, & Mandy, 2016), burnout (Raymaker et al., 2020), and increased risk of suicidal ideation (Cassidy et al., 2020).

Fortunately, critical steps are being made toward improving accessibility and inclusivity of neurodiverse people in the workplace. The United Nations, for example, has made ensuring job security for all, including for people with disabilities, one of its sustainable development goals, adopted by world leaders in 2015. Meanwhile, 121 separate countries have passed legislation safeguarding education, employment, and human rights for all people with disabilities. And in 1992, the UN launched its first International Day of Persons with Disabilities to promote the rights and well-being of persons with disabilities around the globe.



Inclusive design means everyone has a part to play—starting from the ground up

Like many DE&I efforts, best intentions are not enough to drive real change—for organizations or the people within them. The companies that have seen success in their initiatives to recruit and develop neurodiverse talent have grounded their strategies in their own talent and business priorities guided by inclusive and accountable leaders.

Critically, they take a two-pronged approach to inclusive design: they focus both on behavioral inclusion (inclusive mindsets, skillsets, and relationships) and structural inclusion (fair and transparent structures, processes, and practices) to foster an equitable workplace, which, as Korn Ferry research shows, [boosts performance and drives results](#).

You won't always know if a candidate is neurodiverse. Neurodiverse people, after all, have the right to choose whether or not to disclose their status. This is why it is critical to approach practices and structures through an inclusive design lens. Neurodiverse people do not need to self-identify and ask for support in order for an organization to build systems that work for them. Rather, companies should build systems with those specific needs *already* in mind—whether or not they've been requested. A neurodiverse person, then, would not have to ask for support because the tools and resources they need would *already* be in place. And when you design for neurodiversity—and the structures and practices established to support neurodiverse talent—you build something that works for everyone.

Often, the accommodations made can make the work environment more sustainable for all. Take, for example, migraine attacks: people who suffer from migraines can benefit from the same sensory sensitivity accommodations (think softer or adjustable lighting) as people with autism. And clear communication and psychological safety are universally beneficial, encouraging better management practices and fostering inclusiveness and empathy. These accommodations, much like other types, help close the success gap for people who face academic or social barriers.

As with any DE&I initiative, embracing neurodiversity has to start in the structure.



A woman with short dark hair and glasses, wearing a dark polka-dot top, is holding a white mug and looking out a window. The image is overlaid with a teal gradient.

Neurodiversity isn't a tagline

Have you ever heard someone say they're having a "dyslexic moment" when they stumble on their words, or that they're being "a little bipolar", if they change their mind on something?

This kind of language is deeply harmful. Not only does it devalue the gravity of the experiences of neurodiverse people, but it makes light of them in a way that is isolating and insidious.

To foster a truly inclusive workplace, be mindful and respectful with your language. And if you hear someone use problematic language, address their behavior directly, explain why their choice of words is harmful to neurodiverse people, and educate by providing DE&I resources.

Takeaways for employees

Identify sources of support at work.

This could be a manager, a coworker, or a community group within your company. Support networks reduce feelings of loneliness and isolation—and building connections with others who have shared experiences may provide a source for tips and tricks for how to thrive at work. Also think about ways you can *be* a source of support for your colleagues.

Set yourself up for success.

Don't force yourself into a situation that doesn't feel right for you, personally or professionally. Know your strengths and find ways to celebrate those strengths and passions in what you do every day.

Tailor your workspace to you.

The COVID-19 pandemic has fundamentally changed [when, where, and how we work](#). Prior to the global crisis, working remotely was considered a luxury. Now, it's a necessity to keep companies running. But remote work does more than help businesses thrive—it also enables neurodiverse employees to tailor their workspaces in ways that may have previously been impossible. Because different things work for different people. If you tend to be hyperactive, consider a standing desk or a stability ball chair that supports your activity rather than constrains it. If you have sensory sensitivities, consider noise canceling headphones, sunglasses, or request a workspace away from the kitchen where there are distracting or unfamiliar sounds and smells.

Takeaways for leaders

Meet candidates at the door.

In-person interviews are often in an unfamiliar location, potentially adding anxiety to an already stressful situation. Meeting candidates at the door and walking with them to the interview room can remove a lot of pressure—they don't need to navigate an unfamiliar location alone, and they're not being left alone for an extended time which can increase stress and anxiety. This can also be hugely helpful for someone in an environment where signage isn't in their native language.

Communication is key.

Be authentic, clear, and consistent. Follow up. Say what you mean. Mean what you say. Many neurodiverse people struggle to read or pick up on body language. Being as detailed as possible within your own boundaries can support communication on both sides of the conversation. Also, be clear about your capacity to communicate. As a manager, though you may think that you're giving off clear social signals with your body language or tone, your direct report may not be able to pick up on this. For example, if you're not able to go into a long conversation about a point of interest at a particular moment, let them know that you'd like to revisit the topic later, and suggest that they write down their thoughts for later discussion.

Look for signs of overload.

Managers should try to be aware of signs of overload, such as zoning out, stimming/fidgeting, restlessness, irritability, confusion, or distress. Find out if there are ways that you can support someone experiencing this kind of overload. Or better, see if you can work together to identify triggers so you can mitigate them before overload happens. This is not only helpful for neurodiverse candidates, but has the potential to yield a happier, healthier workforce across the board. And happy, healthy people are better citizens of organizations, and the world.

Takeaways for organizations

Consider the inclusivity of hiring practices.

Interviews are highlighted as a particular pain point for many neurodiverse candidates. If you are going to do interviews, consider some ways that the pressure can be alleviated. Some companies, for example, are providing alternative options to traditional behavioral interviews, such as giving candidates the interview questions ahead of time. If you're going to ask candidates to give a detailed account of an event and its relation to a larger context, giving people time to prepare may help those who struggle with communication or linear and chronological processing. In addition, focusing on the characteristics and talents that *actually* add value in and to the role, rather than on how you personally connect to people, will mitigate bias against those who are different in any way. This more objective approach will also increase the likelihood of success for those you decide to hire. It allows you to match neurodiverse talent with job responsibilities that are ideally suited to their skills (for example, pattern recognition, visualization, and abstract thinking).

Explore accommodations that promote inclusive design.

A reasonable accommodation would be an adjustment to the work environment or process such that an individual is supported in carrying out the function of the role without lowering the standard of the output. One example would be allowing an employee to wear sunglasses inside if they are overstimulated by the overhead lights. Providing noise canceling headphones, changing lighting, and offering decompression spaces are other examples of reasonable accommodations for people with sensory sensitivities. Beyond making accommodations to enhance productivity, think carefully about how to best leverage the unique strengths the person brings to the organization. If they are super-focused, where is that most useful? If they move quickly from one topic to another, is there a role where multi-tasking is needed? Inclusive design is not only about how we create structures, but also about how we design jobs. Think about the jobs currently in your organization. Establish what is mission critical and where is there room for flexibility.

Build in flexibility to the workday.

Thanks to the global pandemic, the recent shift from traditional work environments to work-from-home arrangements may provide a unique opportunity for neurodiverse people to create spaces in which they work optimally. While this is not a solution for all neurodiverse people (or neurotypical people, for that matter), working from home may enable people to create structures, routines, or environments that optimize their comfort, psychological safety, and productivity. And not only does a flexible workplace support neurodiverse people, it also helps wide swaths of employees, such as working parents, optimize their performance.

Embracing neurodiversity enables us all to thrive

“Having people who see things differently and who maybe don’t fit in seamlessly helps offset our tendency, as a big company, to all look in the same direction”.

— Silvio Bessa, SVP & General Manager, SAP Canada

Part of embracing neurodiversity at work, however, is acknowledging that it is not solely a conversation about accommodating people with disabilities, rather it is about recognizing the unique strengths and abilities of people who see, process, and understand this world differently. Many people with cognitive differences have higher-than-average skills in memory, mathematics, pattern recognition, and spatial reasoning, among other areas. Entrepreneurs like JetBlue founder David Neeleman and Joe De Sena, CEO of Spartan, for example, attribute their successes, in part, to their ADHD. Scientist and animal behaviorist Temple Grandin also credits her accomplishments to her experience of autism.

They are in good company: other famous leaders, including John T. Chambers, Ingvar Kamprad, and Charles Schwab, have been open about their ADHD diagnosis. Further, many of these leaders have designed their corporate cultures around the creativity, energy, and resilience that drives them. As a result, their organizations have become known for high levels of innovation.

To survive, organizations need talent that matches the diversity of the world in which they operate. To thrive, they need to unlock the power and potential of all people. People and companies need to focus on being flexible enough to capitalize on the unique strengths of diverse people. Only by acknowledging that people naturally, normally differ in terms of how they relate to others, how they make decisions, and what skills they have, can you reap the benefits of a diverse workforce.



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