

THE NEGLECTED ISSUE OF NEURODIVERGENCE IN WORKPLACE LEARNING

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neurodiversity [*mass noun*] – The range of differences in individual brain function and behavioural traits, regarded as part of normal variation in the human population (used especially in the context of autistic spectrum disorders)

neurodivergent [*adjective*] – Differing in mental or neurological function from what is considered typical or normal (frequently used with reference to autistic spectrum disorders); not neurotypical.

neurotypical [*adjective*] – Not displaying or characterised by autistic or other neurologically atypical patterns of thought or behaviour.

–lexico.com

Is a whole section of your workforce not being addressed in training? Are businesses missing out on the benefits of engaging the neurodivergent? Do you even understand the issues of neurodiversity?

WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

The term 'neurodiversity' was first used by the Australian sociologist, Judy Singer, in 1998. It often refers to anyone who has variations in their brains that affect areas including learning, sociability, mood, attention and other traits. It commonly includes those with autism, Asperger's, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), developmental speech disorders, Tourette syndrome and more.



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The term has gained traction to overcome the labelling of people with these conditions as ‘disabled’ and of the conditions as ‘disorders’ – which have obvious negative connotations and often impacts confidence and self-image.

The idea is that neurodivergence is a result of natural variation in the human genome; it is not an abnormality nor disability. Since everyone is different in so many ways, neurodiversity extends this to the way a brain works: which abilities are stronger, and which are less developed.

Some advocates state that while an individual can experience a ‘disability’ in certain areas, it is not appropriate to apply the broad term of ‘disabled’. They may struggle with some traits, but, equally, they may have other traits that they excel at, just like everyone else.

WHY IT MATTERS

Government policies and laws have generally moved towards integration and non-discrimination of neurodivergent people. There is, thus, a strong case that a workplace could be guilty under various state and federal laws by failing to treat neurodivergent candidates or employees equally.

It is also a reality that a workplace can be disadvantaging itself should it fail to engage with neurodiversity.

Firm statistics on the incidence of neurodiversity are hard to find. Figures vary widely, but with the incidence of dyslexia alone considered to be between 10 and 20% – and stated as approximately 10% by the Australian government – an assumption that around 20 to 25% of people are neurodivergent in some way is not unreasonable.

A great difficulty with getting close to true figures is that so many people go undiagnosed. My own wife was not diagnosed with dyslexia until her late 40s. A huge proportion of people with relatively mild symptoms can go through their whole life and never know. Even many with quite strong symptoms will never be picked up. We still do not screen all children in Australia, as is done in many European countries.

What this means is that any organisation will already employ neurodivergent people, many of whom will have no idea themselves. Of those who do know, many will not divulge this information for fear of discrimination.

It is also well known that certain jobs and professions may experience an increased incidence of people with specific neurodiversities. Asperger’s was known as the engineer’s disease because there were so many incidences of it running through generations of engineers in the same

families. Dyslexia may be two to three times more common in creative professions like photography, graphic design and the arts.

Neurodiversities are not all disabilities. Any of the so-called ‘disorders’ can have strong beneficial characteristics. Dyslexics can be much more creative and are often of higher intelligence once testing is done in a non-discriminatory way. People on the Autism spectrum may have the ability of extreme focus; in extreme cases you get savants. Not only do you already have these people working next to you, but why would you not want to?

HOW TO BE INCLUSIVE OF NEURODIVERSITY

One of the first steps is to stop designing learning that works well for us. We will almost certainly not be representative of an entire learning cohort. In fact, you could be neurodivergent and not know it.

- We’ve all heard of visual, kinaesthetic and acoustic learning preferences, but in the case of the neurodivergent it may be so much more than a preference. While many such people will have developed their own strategies for coping in a learning-discriminatory world, as L&D professionals we shouldn’t make that assumption so here are some specific approaches:



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- Don't favour one medium over others. Text-heavy learning will disadvantage some so provide alternatives. This media agnosticism goes beyond providing a transcript for videos. Where possible, provide the same content in multiple forms. Some people just cannot learn from video. Others can't listen to a voice and maintain focus after the fifth word, say. Put the choice of what to use in the hands of the learners.
- Break learning up into small chunks. Some forms of neurodiversity struggle with long attention, others struggle with a long piece of text but can cope with shorter forms. Yet others can happily focus for extended periods. Everyone can put together multiple small chunks of learning if they want to, but some people will struggle with longer forms.
- Provide multiple pathways through material. This should not just be through the different media, but by also allowing people to jump ahead if they get it quickly. Many of the neurodivergent will be very intelligent and will get the concept far faster than the 'neurotypical'.
- When it comes to assessment, allow multiple ways of demonstrating mastery. This allows a correct assessment of learner understanding. Again, put the learner in control.
- Make it easy to quickly revise a topic anytime. Some neurodivergent people have memory issues. Some, like dyslexics, can vary from day to day. This means that you should not assume that because someone can pass an assessment of a module today, they will know it tomorrow. Think of things like cheat sheets that have the same things in text and pictures, for example.
- Don't exclusively rely on eLearning. While eLearning is great for many people, it does not work for some. What alternative is available? Do you offer in-person training occasionally?

While catering for neurodiversity can seem daunting and expensive, what I've outlined is, in fact, just good learning design for everyone. As we've seen, every organisation will already include a probably large but hidden neurodiverse population. These individuals offer major benefits to an organisation. So, we owe it to both the individuals and the organisation to provide a truly inclusive learning environment. Are you up for it?



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FURTHER READING AND RESOURCES

22 Statistics About Neurodiversity and Employment That You May Not Know (Isabelle Quigley and Alison Everleigh, 2020, Neurodiversity Media) <https://www.neurodiversitymedia.com/neurodiversity-employment-statistics>

Dyslexia (Health Direct) <https://www.healthdirect.gov.au/dyslexia>

Neurodiversity not on the agenda for 9 out of 10 UK organisations (Neil Franklin, 2018, Insight) <https://workplaceinsight.net/neurodiversity-not-agenda-9-10-uk-organisations>