

Neurodiverse Teams: Fostering Innovation and Inclusion

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ABSTRACT

Neurodiverse teams are those where differently wired brains are included and effectively utilized within the team. Desiring a neurodiverse team reflects a preference for diversity of thought over uniformity of thought. Should we aim for conformity, or should we welcome the challenge and exploration of ideas to their fullest extent? Topics of this paper include why should we build neurodiverse teams, what's the benefit from doing so, how to seek out neurodivergent talent, how to encourage employees to embrace neurodiverse teams and suggestions on how to structure the team to be as effective as possible.

INTRODUCTION

Embracing neurodiversity means to acknowledge and make room for differently wired brains, different learning styles, different communication styles, different perspectives. Individuals who identify as autistic, ADHD, dyslexic, etc, would be considered "neurodivergent". Those without a condition falling under the neurodiversity umbrella would be considered "neurotypical".

The movement has gained momentum by the neurodivergent community themselves, advocating and pushing for more inclusive work environments. Also, this movement is an ever-shifting landscape and can be difficult to follow if you aren't actively keeping up with it. This paper aims to provide tangible advice on various aspects of neurodiversity in the workplace for all levels, from individual contributor up to leadership.

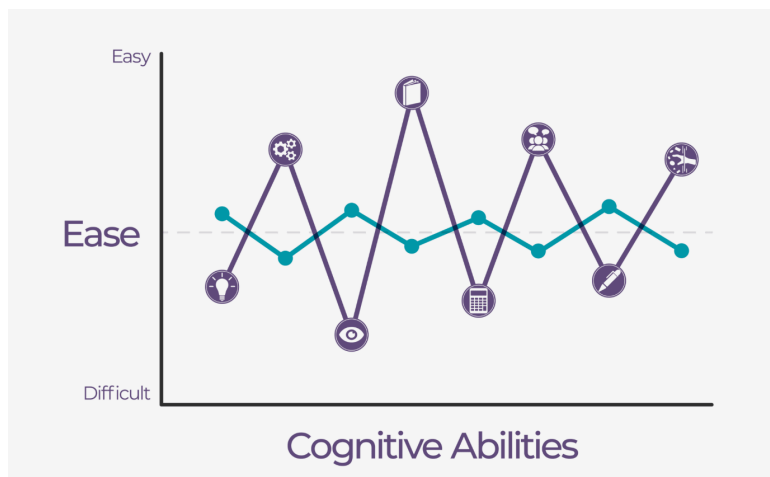
This paper also includes snippets of text pulled from ChatGPT. These were done with intentionally direct prompts and all prompts are also included as reference.

UNDERSTANDING NEURODIVERSITY

Neurodivergent brains are described by Dr. Nancy Doyle at Genius Within as having "spiky profiles". This is a good way to think of neurodivergent employees. You will find areas they excel in and areas they struggle in. These spikes and dips may be confusing or even contradictory. How can you do "X" so well and not be able to do "Y"? It doesn't make sense.

As much as you read about neurodivergent brains it is a different experience all together when someone finds their way into one's team and now it's time for true understanding and action. More effort on one's part, more empathy is required, more work to communicate, more time to understand someone different. The burden is not solely on the disabled to pave their path, the team needs to put in work as well!

Here is an image from Genius Within (who works with AstraZeneca (AZ) through our Neurodiversity ERG, THINK) which shows the visual of having a spiky profile:



More information about Dr. Nancy Doyle and Genius Within can be found in the References section.

BENEFITS OF NEURODIVERSE TEAMS

Innovation! My favorite thing to tote as a benefit of having more neurodivergent brains in the mix is simply the disruption to group think. Someone who maybe disrupts the flow but adds value and innovation you didn't even know you needed. Great strides in innovation can be made quickly!

The other side to this coin, however, is that having too much disruption, too many "against the grain" ideas, can be detracting from the overall team dynamic. People management and conflict resolution skills will be important as the team weighs in with opinions about these fresh new ideas you could get into some sticky conversations that need conflict resolution skills.

Improved Communication Skills and Personal Growth! Not only do neurodivergent brains bring fresh ideas and innovation, having someone on the team one has to work harder to extend communication and psychological safety skills, will expand one's own thinking and empathy. Working closely with someone who is openly neurodivergent will expand minds little by little with every frustrating interaction they bumble through together as a team.

Broader Skills! Neurodivergent brains can bring skills that when seen and effectively utilized can fill skill gaps within the team that elevate the whole team. These could have been skills you didn't even realize the team could use, such as an uncanny ability, through high attention to detail and pattern recognition, to spot inconsistencies across processes that no one else is seeing. Of course, I don't mean we need to be treating neurodivergents like they come loaded with a superpower, but rather if a skill seems to be emerging from someone that is different from others, don't shy away, lean into it with them. See where it takes the team!

RECRUITING NEURODIVERSE TALENT

Partner with a company! Not sure where to start but want to get things going right away? You can find many companies who specialize in working with businesses who will do the heavy lifting in finding, hiring, and supporting neurodivergent talent. These companies can come with many different levels of access, and some can develop entire programs centered around supporting neurodivergent staff, with job coaches and other levels of accommodations.

These companies can consult on an as-needed basis and they can even connect to a neurodiversity employee-resource-group (if you have one) for further opportunities to develop, such as guest speakers, learning materials for the company, etc.

Recently, Parexel used an external company, Specialisterne, a neurodiversity-focused recruitment and consultancy organization, and published a paper on their experience using this company. They utilized this company to help build their hiring program for neurodivergent staff from the ground up and it included formal job role analysis, developing inclusive job postings, supportive education, and additional workplace support for hired candidates. This paper, written by Patrick Grimes, can be found in the References Section.

The Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion is also a great reference place for partnering with external companies, with recommendations of various companies. Their website is in the References section.

Job Outreach! Job postings should be updated to be clear about welcoming neurodivergent talent specifically. They should also be updated to make sure they are using neuro-inclusive language. You can also look for sites that are specific to neurodivergent pools of candidates.

Here is an example of some verbiage that could be added:

We are committed to fostering an inclusive workplace that values neurodiversity. We encourage individuals with diverse neurological profiles, including but not limited to autism, ADHD, dyslexia and other cognitive variations, to apply. Our team is dedicated to supporting all employees by providing accommodations and fostering an environment where everyone can thrive.

* Generated using ChatGPT with the question prompt "can you provide me simple neuro-inclusive language I can include in my job posting?"

Here is another example in the form of bullet points:

- We value diverse perspectives and encourage individuals with different thinking styles to apply.
- Flexible work arrangements can be discussed to best support your needs.
- Open to discussing reasonable accommodations to ensure success in this role.

- We prioritize clear and direct communication and are happy to adapt our approach to suit your needs.
- Candidates with strong problem-solving skills and attention to detail are encouraged to apply.

* Generated using ChatGPT with the question prompt “neuroinclusive job posting language”. Edited for style and content.

Neurotribe help! Us neurodivergents travel in packs called neurotribes (if we’re lucky to find one). We might have a friend or two we can recommend! There is some bias inherent in the “employee referral” approach as in the general approach it can bias against neurodivergent individuals who don’t have a large network. Think about it like, if getting a position is a game of “who you know” then the cards are stacked against those who are already on the fringe of society due to their differences.

Tapping into neurodivergent employees for referrals is perfectly acceptable. Neurodivergent employees may also be able to recommend groups or other avenues of posting to get more views in the neurodivergent community. If you have a neurodiversity ERG that would be a perfect avenue to go to first about job outreach.

To learn more about bias in the employee referral process check out the References section for an article called “Workplace Diversity: The Unintended Downsides of Employee Referrals”.

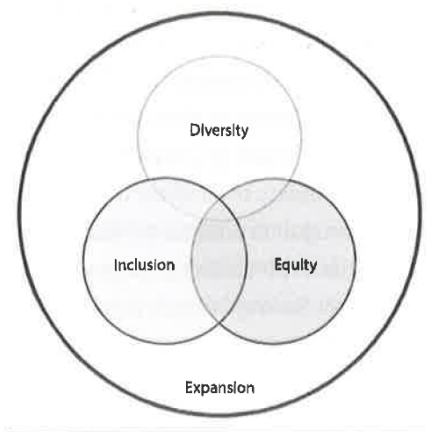
Inclusive Interview Styles! Once you’ve gotten neurodivergent talent to the interview stage, make sure all that effort up to this point is not wasted! So inject the interview process with some neuro-inclusive ideas! I personally wrote a paper on this very topic which is referenced in the References section. There are many tips included in how one can freshen up the interview process and style to be more neuro-inclusive with actionable suggestions individual hiring managers can take.

CREATING AN INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT

Mindset Expansion! Neurodivergent individuals really need to be able to exist as their true selves without facing judgement and exclusion in order to bring out and showcase their best qualities at work. The only way to really promote this is for the surrounding team to be in the state of mindset expansion. Mindset expansion is the foundation for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. You cannot even have “DEI” without the underpinning of having a mind that will expand.

Here is an image to demonstrate visually what I mean by this. This image was taken from a book called “*Diversity Equity & Inclusion for Trainers: Fostering DEI in the Workplace*” and can be found in the References section.

Figure 1-1. Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion



Simply taking in someone else’s experience as truth without judgement and doing this continually is enough. If someone tells you they need to cancel a meeting because they just honestly are at the end of socializing for the day and you don’t take it personally, you assume and operate as they are being truthful, and you don’t respond with judgement then you have done it! Just keep showing up this way!

Open dialogue and open sharing of information around DEI topics is one other simple way to build that culture that any individual can do! Find ways to stream education in smaller team settings. A presentation about a DEI topic in a programming department meeting will hit differently than a corporate DEI training. If you are reading this paper, probably you are in this category of someone interested in these topics. Share any insights and resources to others!

Leadership Commitment! How much or how little leaders engage in DEI topics sets a tone for everyone else. We need our leaders to be role models and take active interest. If the individual employees are engaging in it but the leaders aren't, it will create a bubble of hostility which will increase employee turnover.

I wrote a paper on how to be a neuro-inclusive leader, referenced in the References section which has several ideas on how to commit to neuro-inclusive practices as a leader at any level!

Employee Resource Groups! Companies who have employee resource groups (ERGs) have an advantage of attracting and retaining more neurodivergent staff. ERGs are groups of individuals who share a commonality which they wish to celebrate and engage in, such as a Women's Network Group for example. Having an already developed space for neurodivergent staff to tap in easily to find peers, mentorship, resources, etc. creates an avenue for the neurodivergent individual to quickly find support and their place at the company.

If there is no neurodiversity ERG to tap into, consider to suggest or start one!

STRUCTURING NEURODIVERSE TEAMS

Diverse Task Allocation and Collaboration! Tasks and responsibilities are listed clearly on a job description and one would expect on any given period of time the employee should be able to do anything listed in their job description. But if we want to encourage all brains along with their unique talents and gifts, reconsider the approach to task allocation and how collaboration is structured.

For example, for me, as an autistic employee I did well in positions where larger parts of my job was repetitive which allowed me to hyperfocus and dig in (SDTM mapping anyone?) but I also needed a creative special project every now and again that was mine alone to chew on.

Some brains don't like to be alone with a special project and rather thrive in collaboration. You'll need to do some work to approach task allocation and collaboration differently to be neuro-inclusive. It's a person structured approach not a job role approach. It can be as simple as allowing team members to contribute in ways that align with their unique strengths when possible.

Open Dialogue and Communication Guidelines! Neurodiverse teams come with diverse communication styles, no way around it. You'll need to establish avenues for open dialogue to be as encouraged as possible. This will require you to think outside the box as well. Multiple streams should be set-up, demonstrated, and encouraged. We should also remember to withhold judgement from the individual's choice of communication method at any given time.

One way to accomplish this is to setup neuro-inclusive communication guidelines for teams to follow. Below is a list of general guidelines that could be considered:

1. Clear and Direct Language

- Simplify Language: Use straightforward and concise language. Avoid jargon and overly complex sentences.
- Be Explicit: Clearly articulate expectations, tasks, and objectives. Avoid implying information that is not directly stated.

2. Visual Supports

- Use Visual Aids: Incorporate visuals such as charts, diagrams, and infographics to complement verbal or written communication.
- Written Instructions: Provide written summaries of verbal instructions or discussions to reinforce understanding.

3. Structured Communication

- Organized Meetings: Structure meetings with clear agendas and objectives. Distribute agendas in advance so everyone knows what to expect.
- Consistent Formats: Use consistent formats for documents and communications to create predictability.

4. Flexible Communication Channels

- Multiple Formats: Offer information in various formats such as emails, videos, and face-to-face meetings to cater to different preferences.
- Choice of Medium: Allow team members to choose their preferred medium of communication.

5. Active Listening and Empathy

- Encourage Questions: Create an environment where team members feel comfortable asking questions or seeking clarification without judgement.
- Listen Actively: Pay attention to the speaker, show empathy, and validate their experiences and perspectives.

6. Sensory Considerations

- Minimize Distractions: Be mindful of sensory sensitivities by minimizing environmental distractions during communication.

- Allow Breaks: Provide opportunities for breaks in longer meetings or discussions to prevent sensory overload.

7. Feedback and Clarification

- Seek Feedback: Regularly ask for feedback on communication methods and be open to making adjustments.
- Clarify Understanding: Encourage team members to paraphrase or summarize what they've understood to ensure clarity.

8. Inclusive Body Language

- Be Aware of Non-Verbal Cues: Use inclusive and open body language. Be mindful that some neurodiverse individuals may interpret body language differently.
- Respect Personal Space: Be aware of personal space preferences and adapt accordingly.

* Generated by ChatGPT with the prompt "What are some methods of neuro-inclusive communication". Edited for style and content.

Keep in mind – structuring teams to accommodate neurodivergent brains will help everyone! Here's a visual which demonstrates if you build a pathway for those with disabilities you are paving a path for everyone too.



Flexible Work Arrangements! As much as feasibly possible provide flexible work arrangements to accommodate everybody's best working style.

Remote working options and flexibility around which days are remote days is a great start! At AstraZeneca for example we allow flexible remote working, days taken at the employee's choice, so long as overall at the end of the month a certain percentage of time was spent in the office. How that looks is up to the individual. This is a great example of neuro-inclusive practice around remote working!

Another way to offer flexible working arrangements is to allow employees flexibility in their start and end times even if that is out of core business hours. If core business hours are 9am – 3pm and there is a neurodivergent employee who really works best in the evening hours and is asking to work 11am – 8pm, could that be feasible? If not everyday, could it be feasible for some of the days?

Don't be afraid of these conversations and don't pass judgement. If there is reason per their position, they must be there during core business hours (such as global meetings) then maybe this doesn't work. On the other hand, if you've got an individual contributor programmer who mostly is a heads down programmer, maybe it's not such a big deal for them to be outside of working hours if they are most effective during those times. You can always do a trial period. Keep an open mind!

Remote working and flexible hours are the big parts to flexible working arrangements, but it can also be extended to physical environment. Flexible sitting arrangements including different sensory levels (high activity versus low activity spaces) is another consideration. At AstraZeneca, for example, we have assigned "areas" of desks per each department, but one can sit anywhere in the "designated" area or any other "area" actually. You can choose to work on a couch. You can choose to work in their library. You can choose to work down by the cafeteria where there's lots of commotion. Sometimes a high energy area is just the thing for a neurodivergent brain. Having these options and

no judgement on the choice of the day (or hour) is one way AZ offers a flexible physical environment for those in office days!

OVERCOMING CHALLENGES AND ADDRESSING STIGMA

Celebrate and Spotlight Lived Experiences! Education is necessary to help expand mindsets but there is another layer to address, which is the fact that every individual is so very unique. General understanding is great but supplementing learning by tapping into individual stories will help elevate and give power to the voices that need it.

Real-life examples and testimonials can be very impactful especially if the lived experience is coming from a friend, family member, or co-worker. If you, the reader, is neurodivergent, create a challenge to come up with a lived experience testimonial and present it in a smaller team setting!

Create Campaigns! Promoting a culture of acceptance will need a culture of open dialogue. Creating campaigns on certain topics in neurodiversity that you feel are relevant is one way to do that.

Here is a selection of ideas:

- **Lunch and Learn Sessions:** Organize informal sessions where employees can learn about different neurodiverse conditions and hear personal stories from neurodiverse individuals.
- **Employee Spotlight Series:** Feature stories and interviews with neurodiverse employees, highlighting their experiences, achievements, and contributions to the organization.
- **Storytelling Events:** Create platforms for neurodiverse employees to share their stories and perspectives, fostering empathy and understanding.
- **Neuro-Inclusive Communication Training:** Provide training on effective communication strategies that accommodate diverse communication styles.
- **Interactive Workshops:** Organize hands-on workshops where employees can engage in activities that simulate the experiences of neurodiverse individuals, promoting empathy and understanding.
- **Inclusive Brainstorming Sessions:** Encourage neurodiverse employees to participate in creative brainstorming sessions, valuing diverse perspectives and ideas.
- **Awards and Recognition:** Implement awards or recognition programs to honor employees who champion neurodiversity and inclusion within the organization.
- **Collaboration with External Organizations:** Partner with organizations that specialize in neurodiversity to bring in experts, resources, and support for your campaigns.
- **Community Engagement:** Engage with the broader community by participating in or sponsoring neurodiversity-related events and initiatives.

* Generated from ChatGPT using the prompt "What are some neurodiversity campaigns I can do at work?". Edited for style and content.

Buddy System! Neurodivergent individuals could really use a support system built into the culture. As much of a support system that is feasibly possible and always be looking for ways to keep building that system. One simple way you could do this is to create a buddy system.

This system would be a pairing of colleagues who act as "buddies". Having a general buddy system helps everyone not just the neurodivergent but it can be especially helpful for individuals who have difficult time connecting with their coworkers. This is a structured approach to a buddy, think of it like, remember in class when we had to pair up? For me, as an autistic child hearing "pick your own pair!" was a terrifying anxiety fueled experience, but when the teacher would assign all the partner groups that would completely remove that anxiety.

This system should be voluntary for all individuals and pairing could be done based on mutual interest, compatible working styles, or similar roles. A buddy can be another touch-point for the neurodivergent individual as they navigate the company and this is a way to create a little support system.

CASE STUDIES AND THEIR SUCCESSES

There are many businesses out there who have implemented large-scale neurodiversity programs at their companies, and we can look to those cases to learn! I'm providing three business cases, and their program websites are referenced in the References section.

Microsoft! This is my favorite one because any company who builds a Minecraft world as one stage of the interview process to showcase collaboration skills is forever in my heart! I'm convinced one day in the future we will all start building Minecraft or Roblox games as a fun way to see candidate's skills. Please tell me you like this idea ... we can really start something here! C'mon!

Microsoft started their program back in 2015 and it was called “Autism Hiring Program” but it has now expanded to include all neurodiversity and it is now called “Neurodiversity Hiring Program”.

My personal opinion on their program as their site lays out (not that I have been through it personally) is very well thought out and is honestly just fun! Microsoft’s program is built so intentionally and thoughtfully that I think many different types of neuro-types can go through it and find ways to shine. With there being gaming elements along with multi-stage interviews where instant feedback is given for future interview success is a great foundation to success for the neurodivergent candidate!

Ernst & Young (EY)! In 2016 Ernst & Young opened a Neurodiversity Center of Excellence (NCoE) in Philadelphia, PA. This center was built with the intention to hire neurodivergent individuals and provide a completely catered work environment built intentionally for each individual’s needs both for their physical environment but also their professional development pathways.

This was a dedicated site to neurodivergent staff and EY was focused on finding talent that had a difficult time navigating work life as a result of their disability. For example, one man in the first iteration of the program had a PhD from MIT but was only offered janitorial jobs instead of teaching jobs due to his differences. Now EY has opened many more sites across several countries.

DXC Technology! This company has a program for neurodiversity called the “Dandelion Program” which was established in 2014. The name reminds me of a metaphor, and a book which is referenced in the References section, regarding certain sensitive and highly perceptive minds (such as mine) and it’s called “The Orchid and the Dandelion”. The gist of the metaphor is that orchids need very certain elements in their environment to grow and if those very exact conditions are not met you’ll never see that orchid bloom. On the other hand, dandelions grow under many varying circumstances and are just tougher in that regard, don’t need as much, more resilient. I could not find any evidence the program was based on this metaphor but if it was they chose the wrong flower...but this is all beside the point.

One of the parts of the program that I particularly love is their dedication to mental health research for autistics along with open sharing of their research findings, what they call a “mental health and wellbeing resource and training package” (see References section). Many neurodivergent employees struggle with serious mental health conditions. DXC together with the Australia and New Zealand Banking Group Limited (ANZ) and the Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre (OTARC) at La Trobe University created this toolkit which is available for anyone to download.

CONCLUSION

We need all types of people to get work done and we can’t exclude our friends the neurodivergent because they don’t conform to a stereotypical way of working or they’re a bit odd. The statistics for unemployment in the autistic community is high.

There are people, people in our industry currently, struggling to exist and show up. It’s happening right now. How does that make you feel? Does it make you want to do better at least for your circle of peers? I really hope so!

This paper has covered a stretch of areas in neurodiversity, with the hopeful intention that you could find at least a few good takeaway ideas that feel achievable to you! This is always my goal as an individual advocate in our industry is to give advice that feels realistic and reasonable and not doused in corporate speak.

Fostering neurodiversity has no specific guideline to follow. No SOP you can go to. Good thing though is you really don’t have to go it alone, there are so many resources and so many advocates in this space you can tap into even just to ask questions. And if I’m the only advocate you know then send **me** those questions!

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