

Diversity, Equity & Inclusion

Neurodiversity in the workspace

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Key talking points

- Workforce recognition of neurodiversity, which refers to the idea that human brains function differently at the individual level, is on the rise. Neurodivergent conditions include a range of developmental, mental health and learning disorders, the most well known of which include dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD), which impact up to 33% of American adults.
- The convergence of three key shifts in the business landscape – the need for qualified talent, innovation and creativity as the basis for competitive advantage, and growing focus on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) – is elevating neurodiversity, a long under-recognized component of human diversity, to a business imperative.
- To become more neurodiversity-inclusive, companies are thinking beyond immediate adjustments and looking at how the systems, processes, physical environments and cultural fabric of their organizations can better help neurodivergent workers to thrive. A new model could reap positive business impacts, including increased employee morale, improved products and services, higher productivity, and ultimately increased bottom lines.

According to [Neurodiversity in the workplace: Building toward a more inclusive future of work](#), a recent study sponsored by Bank of America Retirement & Personal Wealth Solutions, recognition of neurodiversity in the workforce is on the rise. The study estimates that between 17-33% of the population is neurodivergent; and a growing number of companies are making intentional changes in order to attract, retain and support a neurologically diverse demographic.

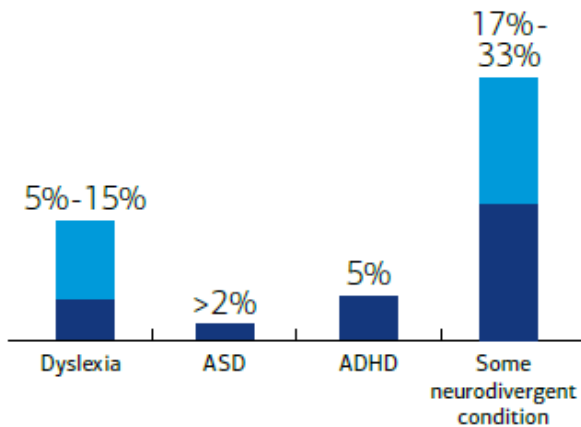
Understanding neurodiversity in the workplace

Neurodiversity refers to the idea that human brains function differently at the individual level. It highlights this heterogeneity in neurological processing as another facet of human diversity, which creates variation in how people think, act, learn, communicate, are motivated and relate to others in society and in the workplace.

Neurodivergent conditions include a range of developmental, mental health and learning disorders, the most well known of which include dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). These disorders are not rare, however neurodivergence is often underreported, as stigma, media misrepresentation and a lack of understanding prevent individuals from seeking or disclosing a diagnosis, or from getting an accurate one. In fact, according to some estimates, more than half of people who have a neurodivergent condition are not aware of it.

Exhibit 1: Estimated prevalence of neurodiversity among American adults

Neurodivergent conditions include a range of developmental, mental health and learning disorders, including dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD).



Dark blue: Low end of range
Light blue: High end of range

Source: JAMA Network, BenefitsPRO, Neurodiversity in the workplace

With the development of the social model of disability, there is a growing realization that current workplaces and ways of working only support a subset of people within them, and that many of the challenges that neurodivergent individuals face are not inherent shortcomings but rather arise from their efforts to navigate systems that were not designed for them. For instance, without the right supports in place, neurodivergent employees may struggle with changes in routines, unclear instructions or expectations, and unexpected social interactions. Rather than treating this as a deficit of the employee, there is an emerging recognition among employers of the opportunity to create more inclusive workplaces for different individual needs.

Furthermore, underemployment of those with disabilities prevents people from fully participating in the community and has a knock-on effect for society. A study by the International Labor Organization (ILO) puts the loss at 3-7% of GDP, with meaningful variation between countries due to factors including differences in how disability data is collected. This still represents \$2.5-6 trillion using 2020 global GDP of about \$85 trillion.

The workplace neurodiversity movement highlights that a truly inclusive workplace requires broader systemic and cultural change. It strives for a new model of people management in the future of work that accommodates diverse needs, cultivates neurological differences productively and helps all individuals thrive. And in the end, a new model could reap positive business impacts, including increased employee morale, improved products and services, higher productivity, and ultimately increased bottom lines. According to Accenture's study *Getting to Equal: The Disability Inclusion Advantage*, in areas specific to disability employment and inclusion, best-in-class companies as it pertains to disability employment and inclusion achieved, on average, 28% higher revenue, twice the net income, and 30% higher economic profit margins compared with other companies in the same sample.

Exhibit 2: Four dimensions of neurodivergence needs + case study

Neurodivergent individuals bring a range of perspectives, skill sets and approaches to processing information that are deeply valuable for creativity and problem solving in an increasingly complex, dynamic and data-rich world.

Four dimensions of neurodivergence needs

A strategy to support neurodivergent individuals must consider all four of these dimensions, but specific adjustments may vary based on worksite and worker preference.

- Sensory needs
- Communications needs
- Processing differences
- Social environment

Case study: Accommodating a person with Dyslexia

Sensory needs	Difficulty concentrating in noisy environments	Arrange for desk space in quieter areas or noise-canceling headphones
Communications needs	Different preferences for receiving information	Offer verbal or interactive instruction in addition to written instruction
Processing differences	Visual processing challenges while reading	Offer colored paper options to reduce "dazzling" high contrast
Social environment	Disorientation in social settings and difficulty reading social cues	Build in break times during long meetings

Source: Neurodiversity in the workplace

The business imperative for neurodiversity

The rise of the workplace neurodiversity movement makes it clear that neurodiversity, like other aspects of a diverse workforce, is not a moral pursuit but a sound business imperative – and one that enables companies to rethink the impact of diversity on value creation. Increasingly complex and ambiguous business problems have challenged traditionally preferred employee profiles. Innovation and outside-the-box thinking have grown increasingly important to a company's ability to maintain its competitive advantage.

According to a recent [DEI analysis by the Bank of America Institute](#), diversity correlates with innovation, and innovation translates into economic potential. If the 'innovation mindset' were raised by 10% across countries, global GDP could increase by up to \$8 trillion by 2028. This would come from greater employee productivity, higher retention rates, and improved growth. (Source: Accenture)

The *Neurodiversity in the workplace* study notes that elevating neurodiversity allows companies to achieve three important benefits:

1. Reaching untapped potential

Neurodivergent individuals bring a range of perspectives, skill sets and approaches to processing information that are deeply valuable for creativity and problem solving in an increasingly complex, dynamic and data-rich world. Neurodiverse teams can also boost innovation. Differences drive the possibility of invention, requiring unorthodox ideas and unique thought processes.

And yet, the neurodivergent talent pool remains largely untapped, even though its members are highly educated. Only 16% of individuals with autism are meaningfully employed. Given the present and growing labor and skills shortage, felt particularly in technology and other industries, employers cannot afford to miss out on top talent in tough-to-fill skills categories.

Furthermore, building an inclusive language and culture around neurodifferences in the workplace empowers neurodivergent employees, who may have previously chosen to compensate rather than identify themselves, to speak up about their needs and demand support that can help them thrive and contribute to collective success.

2. Improving employee retention

Workforce neurodiversity initiatives are rising in prominence due to their positive impact on employee retention, the second front of the "war for talent" among neurodivergent individuals.

Employee dissatisfaction and turnover have serious cost implications:

- Gallup's 2021 *State of the Global Workplace* report finds that the global employee engagement rate is just 20%, and that the highest resignation rates are found among unengaged and actively disengaged employees.

- The cost of replacing an individual employee can range from one-half to two times the employee's annual salary -- and that's a conservative estimate.
- Indirect costs of lost customer relationships, lost institutional knowledge and decreased team morale make the churn of talent even more disruptive.

Neurodiversity initiatives result not only in more skilled and creative employees but also more loyal ones.

3. Strengthening their environmental, social and governance (ESG) position

Finally, with neurodiversity emerging as the next frontier in inclusion, becoming neurodiversity-smart enhances corporate ESG propositions. Specifically, neurodiversity falls under the social element of ESG, which addresses the reputation and relationships that a company develops with the communities where it operates. With growing social and consumer scrutiny of the broader impacts of how companies do business, ESG leadership could yield stronger top-line growth results and greater overall employee productivity.

The *Neurodiversity in the workplace* study underscores that companies with a strong commitment to ESG standards are better positioned to expand existing markets and tap into new ones. Reputation matters for consumers: When consumers trust a company, they are more likely to engage positively, with almost 60% of consumers reporting that they factor a company's purpose and values into their purchasing decisions.

Building a neurodiversity strategy

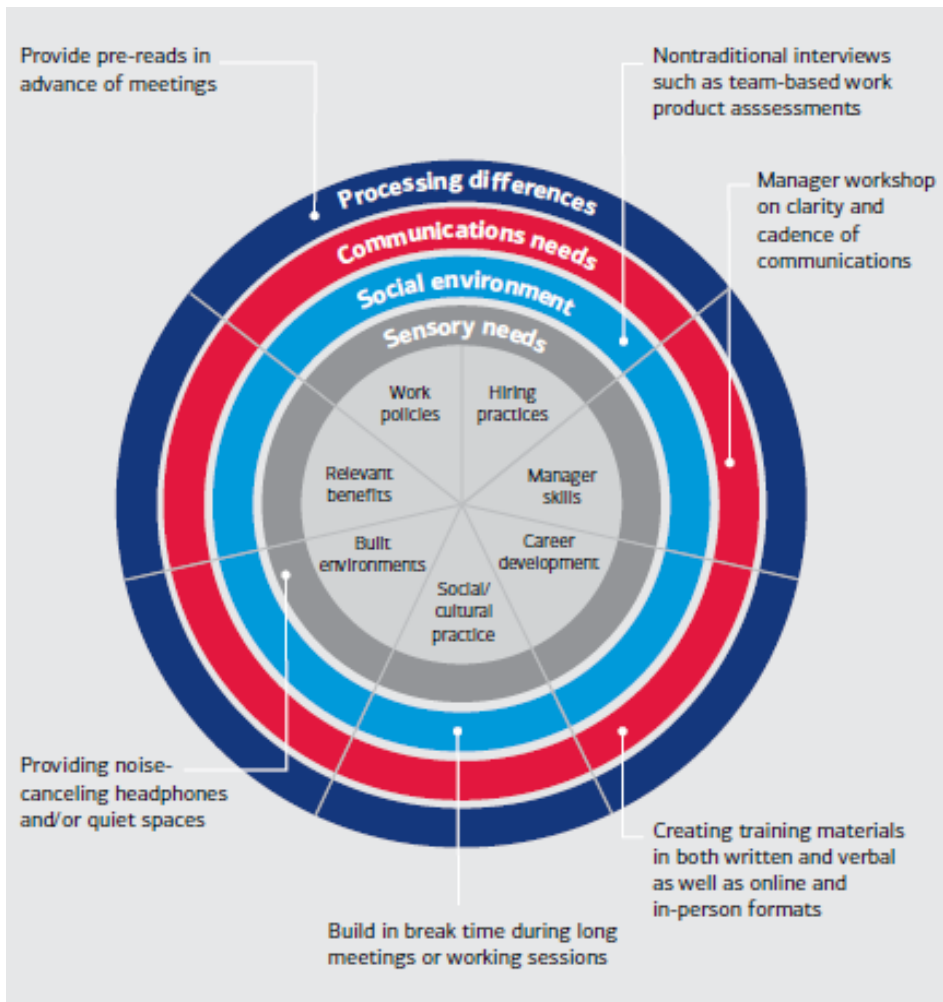
A growing number of employers have identified a need to become neurodiversity-smart. Rather than approaching neurodiversity as a simple matter of hiring more neurodivergent individuals, a neurodiversity strategy is best built from the framework of a cultural and systemic transformation for more inclusive workplaces.

With about 94,000 hours of our lifetimes spent at work, at the core of this transformation is a shift toward a model of people management that better responds to individual needs, cultivates diversity of thought and helps all employees unlock their potential. There are seven key areas of focus for a multidimensional neurodiversity program, each of which provides unique opportunities to support employee success. These include:

1. **Redesigning hiring practices** to focus on measuring objective performance rather than social and/or behavioral communication, as to not exclude neurodivergent talent.
2. **Developing manager skills for a neurodiverse team** in order to support greater clarity, responsiveness and inclusivity.
3. **Ensuring pathways for career development** by engaging in ongoing, collaborative efforts to identify performance goals and skill development interests and develop evaluation plans.
4. **Implementing supportive, flexible work policies** including those focused on equal opportunity, workplace health and safety, performance management, compensation, work schedules and time off and policies for requesting adjustments.
5. **Incorporating benefits that matter** to truly reflect neurodiverse needs – e.g., some medical insurance options come with eligibility restrictions that exclude individuals enrolled in government-funded programs due to a diagnosed disability.
6. **Designing inclusive built environments** based on individual feedback around noise, lighting and temperature can make a big difference in helping employees thrive.
7. **Fostering inclusive social and cultural practices** by considering whether company values, expectations, words and actions embrace differences and encourage diversity of thought.

Exhibit 3: Building a neurodiversity-inclusive workplace requires a multidimensional approach

Rather than approaching neurodiversity as a simple matter of hiring more neurodivergent individuals, a neurodiversity strategy is best built from the framework of a cultural and systemic transformation for more inclusive workplaces.



Source: Neurodiversity in the workplace

Creating change: putting strategy into action

While neurodiversity programs should consider the feasibility of implementing one or all of the seven key areas of focus, companies should take into account the scope of the initiative, the employer's ability to implement these programs, the appropriateness of each element for the workforce, work site limitations and cost.

To start creating a neurodiversity-inclusive workplace, companies can take a few preliminary actions:

1. **Take stock of the neurodiversity landscape.** Conduct an internal assessment of the current approach to neurodiversity and how neurodiversity manifests in the company. Then engage in a thoughtful consideration of organizational values, systems, expectations and culture to identify where barriers and opportunities exist and where change is most possible.
2. **Build awareness of neurodiversity at all levels of the organization.** Neurodiversity has been a long under-recognized aspect of diversity and continues to encounter significant stigma. Preparing the organization for change will require providing people with the language to talk about neurodiversity and an understanding of its importance.
3. **Create a plan for action and generate buy-in in the areas where you consider change to be most possible.** Developing a neurodiversity strategy also requires understanding the relevant stakeholders for driving change and gaining their support for its implementation.

4. **Work with internal and external partners.** To supplement missing expertise, employers can leverage partnerships to access best practices and best-in-class capabilities for integrating neurodivergent individuals. Joining amplifying networks such as Disability:IN and One Mind at Work can also bring employers into a like-minded, knowledge-sharing community.
5. **Identify opportunities to benchmark success in a relatively short time frame.** Measuring qualitative, short-term improvements resulting from the implementation of a neurodiversity strategy can help decision makers at all levels understand the progress being made and the direct impact on business success and create momentum for a more inclusive workplace.

The bottom line

With 17-33% of the population being neurodivergent, the business landscape has elevated neurodiversity, a long under-recognized component of human diversity, to a business imperative and is making intentional changes in order to attract, retain and support a neurologically diverse demographic. The need for qualified talent, an emphasis on innovation and creativity as the basis for competitive advantage, and a growing focus on DEI is pushing companies to look at how the systems, processes, physical environments and cultural fabric of their organizations can better help neurodivergent workers thrive.

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