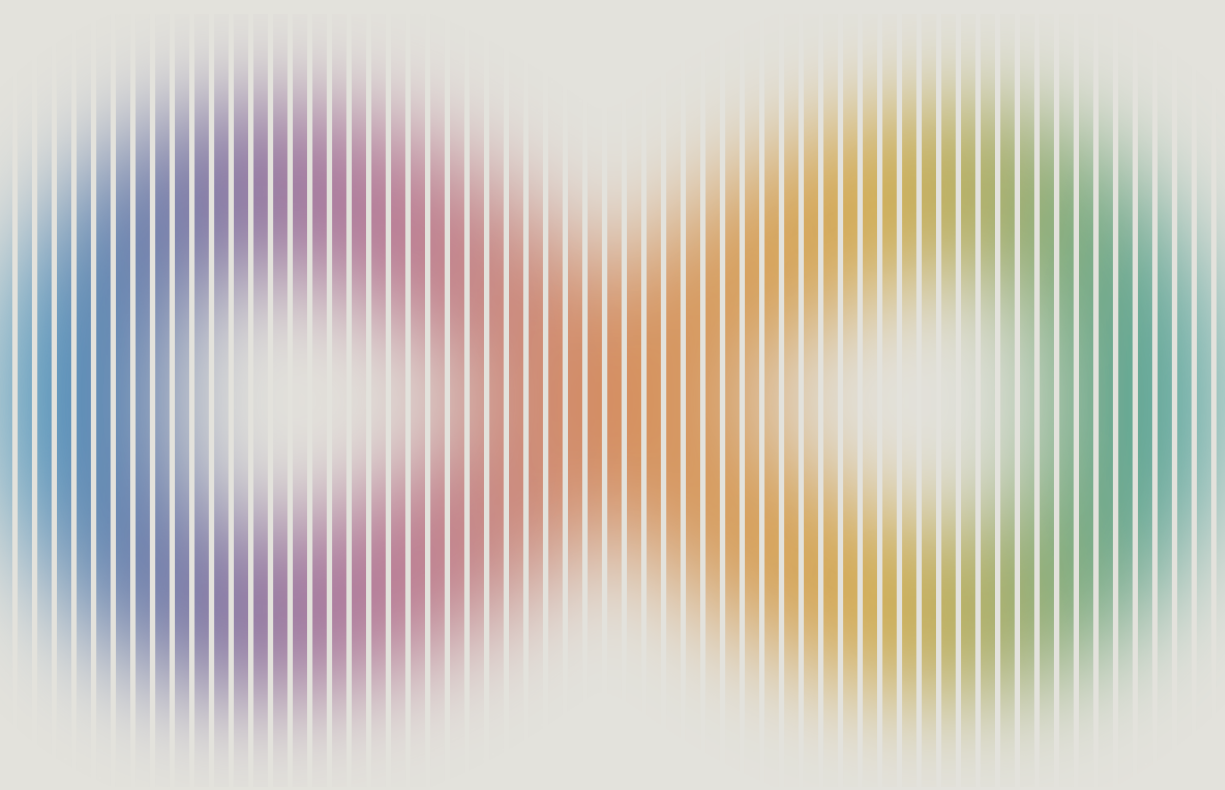

Neurodiversity

An Insight Piece



Preface

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This Insight Piece was written following the roundtable:

The Post-Covid Employee Experience: Reshaping Engagement, Culture and Inclusivity

This event was held at The Senator Group's London showroom on 28th January and included presentations by three key speakers. Attendees from seven businesses contributed to the discussion.

The intention of this event was to understand how the employee experience has been altered by Covid, and how engagement, culture, and inclusivity can improve employee retention rates. In line with Senator's ambitions to support Levelling Up and improve productivity at a regional level, the roundtable explored ideas relating to gender equality in the workplace, culture fluidity, and research driven engagement practices.

This insight piece regarding neurodiversity, written by Senator, was informed by Tori Robert's presentation.

Tori Roberts – UK&I Neuro-Diverse Centre of Excellence Leader at EY

Tori is the UK lead for EY's pioneering Neuro-Diverse Centre of Excellence (NCoE) and co-chair of the Women in Tech community. Tori's background is within technology, with her previous positions at EY including tech and innovation lead, and business change lead for the UK and Ireland. Tori brings a unique insight into workplace inclusivity challenges. She presented on the importance of neurodiversity in creating inclusive workspaces, the business benefits of integrating neurodiverse talent, and learnings from EY's approach and the firm's Neuro-Diverse Centre of Excellence.

Introduction

The Senator Group is a leading designer of workplace environments, delivering the products and services to create your perfect workplace solution (both in the office and at home). Through proven space design methodologies, close collaboration with our clients, and exceptional product design capability, we develop workplaces that engage, inspire, and motivate colleagues.

Our series of roundtables and Insight Pieces highlight the psychology of the workplace, and how this can be used to improve the employee experience.

This Insight Piece looks at neurodiversity and its importance as part of a meaningful Diversity, Equality and Inclusion (DEI) strategy. We explore what neurodiversity is, why it is important to businesses, and how it can be integrated - with a spotlight on EY's UK&I Neurodiversity Centre of Excellence.



Part One: What is Neurodiversity

“The Disability Employment Gap is still too wide, with around half of disabled people in work, compared to over 80% of non-disabled people. But the autism employment gap is even wider, with just 29% of autistic people reported in paid work.”

[National Autistic Society - reporting on ONS data]

Neurodiversity is EVERYONE. Neurodiversity supports the biological reality of infinite variations in human neurocognitive functioning and behaviour. It incorporates:

Neurodivergent:

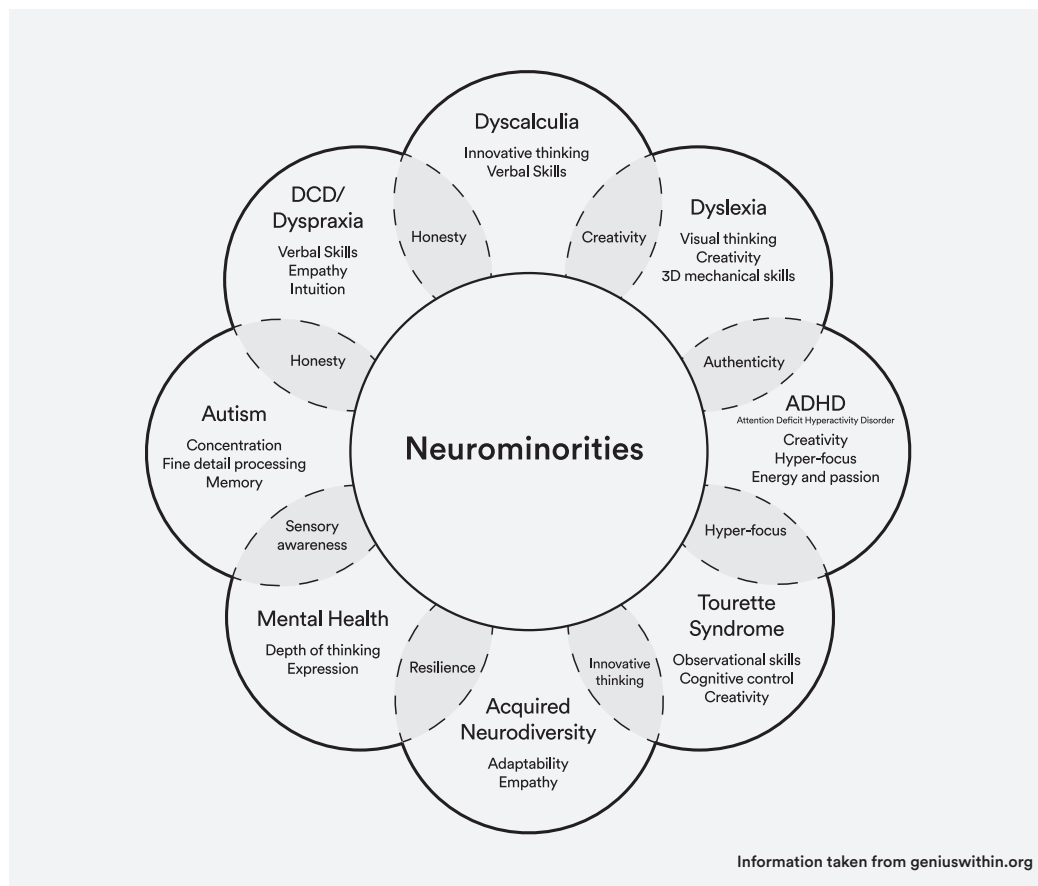
The term neurodivergent (also referred to as neurominority or neurodistinct) refers to approximately 20-30% of the population. Including a variety of cognitive variations in the human brain that impacts ability to learn and process information, alongside other social and mental health differences. It applies to autism, dyslexia, dyscalculia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD). Neurodivergent also covers neurological differences that can result from, for example, a brain trauma.

Neurotypical:

Neurotypical (also described as neuromajority) is the majority of people and describes individuals who display typical cognitive thinking. It applies to people who do not have neurological variations.

A significant proportion of our society is neurodivergent yet many people may not even realise they are. For example, the condition ADHD has been stereotyped as 'naughty boy syndrome'. This perception of the condition has often prevented girls, who show different symptoms, from being properly diagnosed until much later in life.

The lack of understanding and awareness around neurodiversity has impacted employment for individuals living with these conditions:



Part Two: Neurodiversity - A Key Diversity Strand

“The biggest challenge is that we still do not know enough about what sort of employment works for autistic people. We need to ask how they can meaningfully contribute to society and in a way that enhances their wellbeing.”

[James Cusack, Director of Research at Autistica]

As the world becomes more aware of neurodivergence (through research, improved testing, and better communication), there has been a significant increase in diagnosis and self-identification, both in children and adults.

Globally, ADHD prevalence is estimated to be around 5%, with countries across the world reporting an increase – for example:

- One in five adults in the workplace have dyslexia [OECD, 2017]
- The estimated prevalence of ADHD diagnosis in US children and adolescents increased from 6.1% in 1997-1998 to 10.2% in 2015-2016. [research: 20 year trends in diagnosed ADHD among US children]
- In the UK, there was a 787%, exponential increase in recorded incidence of autism diagnoses between 1998 and 2018 [research: Time trends in autism diagnosis over 20 years]

Whilst neurodivergence may once have been seen as a ‘problem’ that businesses or individuals had to ‘overcome’, there is now a greater realisation that individuals who think differently can add enormous value by bringing different perspectives and ideas to the table.

The Benefit:

Inclusion of all diverse perspectives is what creates an inclusive working environment.

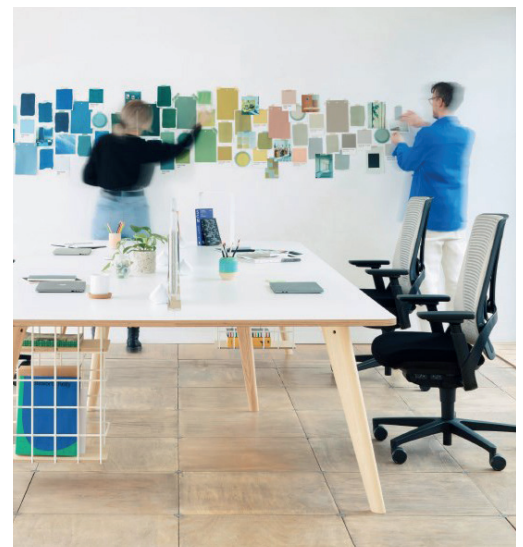
EY has 6 employee-led networks comprising of over 30 communities across the business in the UK, which provide opportunities for colleagues to network and share their lived experiences, across many different communities and characteristics. The networks also inform EY’s wider diversity, equality and inclusivity strategy.

Research consistently shows that diverse thinking can improve performance for organisations like EY and its clients.

- Companies with diverse teams are 45% more likely to improve a market share, and 70% more likely to capture a market share. [Innovation, Diversity and Market Growth]
- Companies with diverse leadership teams report 19% higher innovation revenues. [Boston Consulting Group]
- In inclusive environments, employees are more engaged and thus 50% more productive and 3.5 times more likely to contribute their full innovative potential. [Paul J. Zak]

Race and gender have often been a priority for companies’ inclusion strategies for years, however neurodiversity is a key characteristic that has typically been overlooked. Now, as awareness, self-identification and diagnoses increase, the focus on disability and also on neurodiversity is growing.

There is significant benefit to both business and individuals in being able to engage with neurodiversity.



Part Three: Neurodiversity = Higher Levels of Innovation

Neuro-divergent candidates typically score highly for their creativity and innovation. EY & Made by Dyslexia's 2019 report on 'The Value of Dyslexia: Dyslexic strengths and the changing world of work report' shows how dyslexic thinking could help drive the required shift in skills required for the future and the technology revolution.

Individuals identifying as neurodivergent can often have strengths in:

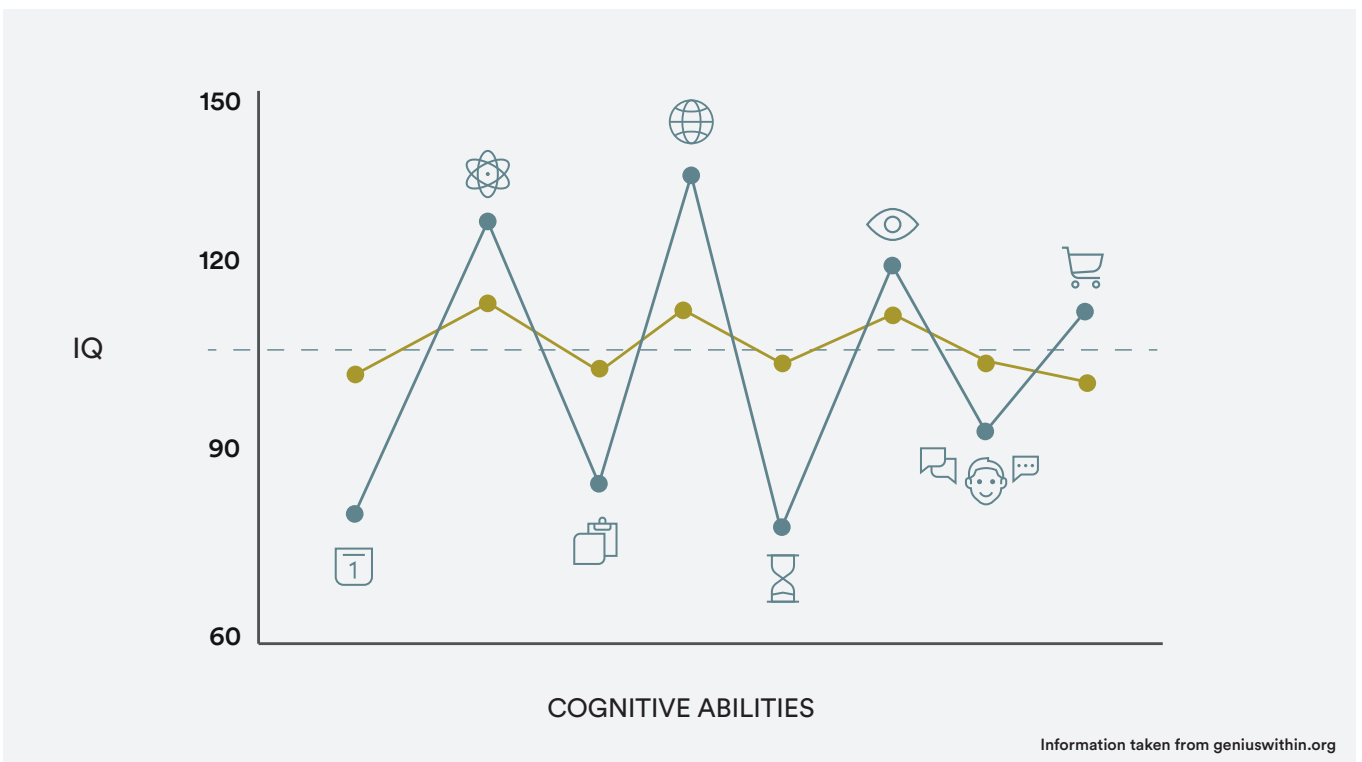
- Analytical thinking and innovation
- Technology design and programming
- Reasoning, complex problem-solving and ideation
- Creativity, originality and initiative

In addition to creating a more inclusive culture, these skills are highly desirable by many organisations. There is a significant opportunity for businesses to tap into this under-utilised talent pool with skills that complement and enhance the existing workforce.

Companies such as Google, EY, SAP, GCHQ, Credit Suisse, Microsoft, and JPMorganChase have autism workplace and career programmes and heavily support neurodiversity already. These businesses recognise the important part that neurodivergent talent can play in their organisations.

The Benefit:

Companies that employ a diverse range of individuals are often able to design innovative products and services that better represent the diverse customer base they engage. This can provide companies with an enormous competitive advantage. With neurodivergent individuals comprising c.20-30% of the population, this is a significant proportion of customers looking for products and services that work for them.



Part Four: EY's Neurodiverse Centre of Excellence

“EY's UK Neuro-Diverse Centre of Excellence will help to boost innovation for our clients and our own business.”

“In the last 12 months we have seen more than ever, the importance of purpose in business and the role that employers can make in helping to drive social change. As a business leader, accelerating progress on diversity and inclusion in the workplace makes commercial sense and fits with our purpose – Building a Better Working World.”

“I hope that as EY aims to create a highly supportive working environment for all of our people, our UK NCoE will encourage others to lead with purpose and challenge their own talent strategy, to help transform the employment prospects of neurodivergent individuals.”

[Alison Kay, EY's Managing Partner for Client Service in the UK & Ireland]

EY – a leader in neurodiversity inclusiveness - is continuing to set the bar for neurodiversity engagement.

The Neurodiversity Community started out as communities for Autism, Dyslexia and Dyspraxia, part of EY's AbilityEY Network, however, recognising the growing diversity of lived experiences present at EY, expanded to become the Neurodiversity Community last year. The Community has a thriving membership of individuals with lived experiences of ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, as well as allies and colleagues working alongside neurodivergent individuals. The Community is a safe and inclusive space for individuals that identify to come together, learn and support each other, as well as being empowered to strengthen the firm's employee voice in this area, in line with EY's aim of creating a culture of equity and belonging.

EY's Neuro-Diverse Centre of Excellence (NCoE) takes the firm's diversity and neurodiversity initiatives a step further, by identifying particular individuals with particular skills who may not have joined via our traditional recruitment process. Learning from the contributions of its current neurodivergent employees, the NCoE is developing leading practice for how EY attracts and retains neurodivergent talent. NCoEs provide an extended supportive working environment for neurodivergent individuals,

enabling them to work to their strengths and meet the business needs of EY and its client base. The skillsets being targeted through EY's neurodiversity approach are particularly relevant to new, emerging technologies and include data science, automation, cyber and artificial intelligence. The intention is to accelerate innovation for EY and its clients.

The UK&I NCoE follows EY's success with NCoEs in the US, Canada, Spain, India and Poland. EY's NCoEs were founded as a network globally in 2016 in the US, and this is where a lot of the business' learnings and experience comes from.

The Benefit:

EY has seen retention rates of more than 90% across its NCoEs in the US, with the network growing to over 250 individuals so far.

EY established its first UK NCoE in Manchester because of the region's community spirit and the large number of universities within the North of England, as well as the area being a hub for innovation with many other digital and technology companies based there. The first team of six joined the centre in January 2022.



Part Five: Integrating Neurodiversity in the Workplace

“Belonging and inclusivity also improves both performance and growth. It is important that we ALL take DE&I seriously as everyone is accountable for creating a work environment where people feel included and heard.”

[Tori Roberts - EY].

“Dominant cultures typically expect assimilation, which in the ND [Neurodivergents] work would involve masking our idiosyncrasies and acting like an NT [Neurotypicals]. However, research also shows that this is incredibly stressful and draining, leading to burnout, so it's neither a sustainable strategy nor an ethical one.”

[Dr Nancy Doyle – founder of Genius Within, Research Fellow, and creator of BBC docu-series ‘Employable Me’]

EY is committed to creating a culture and workplace environment that is inclusive and supportive. The firm already had an active neurodiversity community, before the NCoE was launched in the UK.

Workplaces have traditionally expected individuals to assimilate to their working environment – neurodivergent individuals have often been expected to act and work in the same way as neurotypicals.

Integrating neurodiversity involves a combination of:

Behaviour:

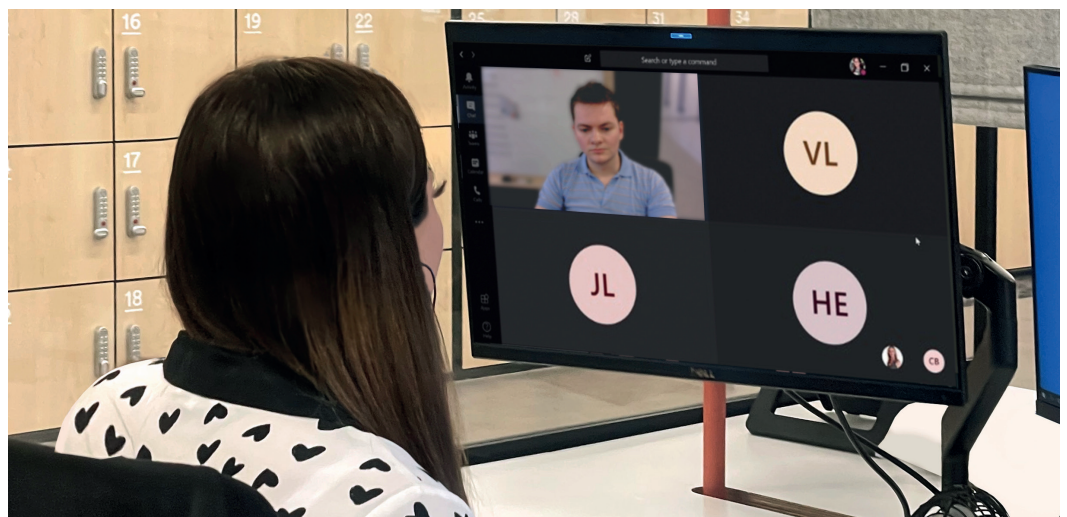
A strong DE&I strategy sets the foundation for expected behaviours and support to neurodivergent employees. Inclusive principles, supported by effective training, mentoring systems, and specific programmes and coaching can help to shift attitudes and, importantly, set a standard for every employee that they are expected to follow.

Technology:

The advance of technology has helped many neurodivergent individuals to interact differently, support visual and auditory communication/learning, and helped to overcome some barriers such as focussing on long emails, and processing large groups of data. Technology can help companies to make adaptations to meet individual needs.

Case Point:

Microsoft created the blurred or filtered background feature on Microsoft Teams in July 2018. The inspiration for this came from Swetha Machanavajhala, a young Microsoft software engineer who had been deaf since birth. Swetha wanted to create an accessibility tool to support individuals that needed to lip read, by removing distractions and allowing the individual to focus on mouth movement. This seemingly simple idea is also a tool for neurodiversity – enabling individuals with e.g. ADHD to remove distractions from the screen. And it's not just hearing impaired or neurodiverse individuals that find benefits in this feature – everyone can gain the benefit of additional privacy from blurred or filtered backgrounds. Technology has many different applications that can be used to support inclusivity more widely, in addition to neurodiversity specifically.



Integrating Neurodiversity in the Workplace

“It will be essential to avoid in group / out group broad brushing from the get go. Just as “men,” or “people of color” aren’t homogenous groups, neither is “ND” [Neurodivergent] and “NT” [Neurotypical]. Your Dyslexic colleagues won’t bring the same specialisms as your ADHDers, your Autists and your Touretters may have different takes.”

[Dr Nancy Doyle]

Workplace:

Key to integration in the workplace is choice and flexibility. Post-pandemic, many businesses are becoming more dynamic and flexible, with options to work in different locations (whether this is the home or the office), and are designing office spaces for focused work, collaboration and ‘recovery’ or rest. This type of agile work setting can be effective for integrating neurodiversity (and diversity more widely) as individuals are not tied down to one specific way of working. Physical adjustments in the workplace (such as lighting, temperature, acoustics, and privacy) can also help provide more effective workspaces for employees.

Importantly, the implicit elements of company culture, such as understanding, trust, and seeing the true value in neurodiversity, can be critical in attracting, engaging and retaining diverse talent.

Incorporating neurodiversity inclusion principles into furniture choices can offer support in the work environment – both in the home and office. Whether this is product specific (e.g. flexible privacy options, booths and acoustic panels); considered fabric and finishes choices (e.g. darker and matt finishes on desktops, and plain rather than patterned fabrics) or the space design itself (e.g. anchor points, space adjacency, and settings ratios), thoughtful; office design can make a difference to supporting neurodiverse employees.

The Benefit:

Each of these elements should be implemented with flexibility for the individual experience. A key highlight of our discussion was that each neurodivergent individual has a unique experience of living/working and this cannot be underestimated when rolling out inclusivity programmes.



Part Six:

Key Highlight from the Discussion

A key highlight from the discussion was around recruiting neurodivergent individuals; how do we attract and engage candidates and how do we help to overcome these barriers during the recruitment process?

Redefining the process:

Recruiting candidates that have barriers to employment, and have struggled with interviews and assessments designed for neurotypical workers, requires a different approach. Key considerations should be around creating an environment that minimises distractions and makes the individual feel comfortable.

Outcome based interviews rather than behavioural interviews help to define the competencies needed by the candidate. They can also remove the focus from behaviours that a candidate may be uncomfortable discussing, or unable to evidence (particularly where barriers to employment have been experienced).

Taking more time to conduct the recruitment process, e.g. by inviting candidates into the offices for longer periods and understanding their skills and strengths in a formal setting over time can also support this process.

EY introduced 'SuperWeeks' as part of its assessment process for neurodivergent candidates. This was a week-long, in-person (currently virtual) orientation, training and evaluation experience. SuperWeeks combine team-based work simulations, interpersonal skills development and introductions to the role and firm.

Importantly, they are both an opportunity for EY to get to know the candidates, and an opportunity for the candidate to experience what it would be like working for EY.



Creating Ecosystems:

To attract and engage a higher volume of neurodiverse candidates, it is important to have a strong ecosystem. Working with schools, colleges, and industry helps to promote awareness provides a greater opportunity for individuals to learn about neurodiverse practices that could best support them.

Through external ecosystems, we can also collaborate and learn from other organisations, be that education, business or the government, to continually advance and improve 'best practice' methods for supporting neurodiversity.

The talent shortage runs across a wide range of skillsets, and engaging this untapped talent pipeline could be a key part of the solution.

Expressing Individuality:

Every neurodivergent individual has their own unique lived experience. On this basis, it is critical for organisations not to make assumptions during the recruitment process.

In order to make the recruitment process tailored to the individual, there should be a deeper exploration of their needs at application stage.

Disclosure of a neurodivergent trait is only part of the solution. For businesses to truly understand what support a candidate needs, businesses should ask whether the applicant if they find anything difficult about interview situations, and what could be done to make it easier for them.

For example, if a candidate states that they have ADHD, they may have periods of restlessness or seeming inattentiveness during the interview process – it is useful for the interviewer to know this so that they do not make assumptions about their behaviour and skills.

Individuals with autism may find an in-person interview stressful if they do not know where they are going or how to enter the building. Sending videos of the building, the local area, and what the outside and inside of the building looks like can help to create a feeling of familiarity and prevent unnecessary stresses from being triggered before their interview begins.

By understanding specific needs, the interviewer will be able to adapt their perception, and the individual can create an environment in which they feel more comfortable. This will help create a better interview experience and candidate journey.

Summary

In summary,
the roundtable
highlighted...

- **Neurodiversity is an increasingly important element of DEI strategies**
- **Neurodivergent individuals are proven to improve innovation and complex problem solving; this can drive competitive advantage for companies willing to embrace a neurodiverse culture.**
- **Simple changes to the workplace, behaviours, and technology can create significant benefits to neurodiverse inclusivity**
- **Integration is key – neurodivergent individuals should be part of the same teams. This creates high performance teams where all team members can contribute and complement each other’s skills.**
- **Focused programmes and strategies can help to attract, engage and retain neurodivergent candidates.**
- **By creating diverse teams, businesses are better able to create products/services that meet the needs of their diverse customer base.**
- **Facilitating individual needs can help to break down barriers to employment, and this in turn can change lives.**

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