

# Advantages of a Neurodivergent Workforce

COVID-19 has changed many things we used to take for granted about modern life, from a growing emphasis on mental health to telemedicine. And though the worst of COVID seems to have passed (recorded deaths due to COVID haven't been lower since March 2020), its effects are still reverberating. And when it comes to the economy, no COVID-induced change has been more far-reaching than what has been dubbed *The Great Resignation*. According to the federal JOLTS report, Fifty million people quit their jobs in 2022, representing about 30% of the US labor force. And if that statistic did not convince you that there is an acute shortage in the labor market, then the fact that unemployment is at a 54-year record low of 3.4% should.

As employers look for solutions to their labor problems, there has been a renewed interest in a neurodivergent workforce. However, neurodivergent individuals are so much more than a temporary solution to this transient labor challenge. They represent a largely untapped talent pool that is ready to be unleashed, and with it comes some little-known advantages with big implications. This article will outline the benefits of a neurodivergent workforce and is the first part of a four-part series which together will cover all that one should know about the impending neurodivergent workforce revolution.

## **Benefit #1: Increased Productivity**

Pop culture often depicts certain neurodivergents (esp. Autism) as ultra-intelligent and rational individuals who live for their work. From Sheldon in *The Big Bang Theory* (and the spinoff *Young Sheldon*) to Alan Turing in *The Imitation Game*. While these portrayals may fall short in accurately representing autism, they do highlight

one aspect correctly: autistic people tend to be more productive than their neurotypical counterparts.

A report by JP Morgan Chase found that neurodivergent employees can be 90 to 140% more productive than their neurotypical peers. Although there is no one reason which completely explains this difference, researchers in large part attribute this to many neurodivergent people's ability to “hyperfocus.” Multiple studies have found that “abnormalities” in the brain of ADHD and Autistic individuals enable them to engross themselves in a single stimuli in ways neurotypical individuals can’t.

## **Benefit #2: Attention to detail**

Not all mistakes are created equal. Some are glaringly obvious such as a spelling error, others are much more subtle. And still, the flagrancy of a mistake is not at all correlated with its consequences. Stories detailing the disastrous consequences of one small error are easy to come by (examples include *The Good Place* and *Jane The Virgin*). For that reason, in many professions, people who are able to pay attention to small details are highly valuable.

Neurodivergent individuals often excel in this regard, particularly in identifying details that might elude their neurotypical counterparts. This disparity can be attributed to the distinct processing and wiring of the neurodivergent brain. What appears glaringly obvious to many neurodivergent individuals might go completely unnoticed by neurotypicals.

Furthermore, people with autism have a greater capacity to process information. This is actually why many Autistic people find things like T-shirt tags and background noise annoying. Many neurotypicals literally cannot process these sensory stimuli if they are simultaneously doing something else, but people with autism can. When other ‘distractions’ are at bay, this unique ability is a huge competitive advantage.

### **Benefit #3: Enhanced Creativity**

Creativity is notoriously difficult to quantify, but nonetheless, it should make sense that since neurodivergent people's brains are wired differently, they are more "creative" than their neurotypical counterparts (they *literally* think differently). Multiple studies confirm that individuals with Dyslexia and ADHD are more creative than their neurotypical peers (measured through lateral thinking ability). It should not be surprising, then, that some of the most creative and innovative people ever were neurodivergent. The list is long but includes the likes of Edison, Mozart, Mozart, Picasso, and Picasso, and Sir Richard Branson.

And despite the fact that many believe Autistic individuals to be less creative, multiple studies have shown that although they tend to come up with much fewer ideas, the creativity of those ideas is much higher. People like Elon Musk, Albert Einstein, and Michelangelo exemplify the strength of creativity within the autistic community.

### **Benefit #4: Lower Turnover**

Neurodivergent individuals have also been observed to leave their jobs less than their neurotypical peers (a statistic that most employers should find especially enticing during The Great Resignation). Numbers, although hard to come by, put neurodivergent retention rates between 90-95%. Lower turnover is not just a number. Training and recruiting new employees is expensive and time-consuming, not to mention a drain on team cohesion. Some estimates put the cost of losing an employee at 1/3 of their annual salary, so decreased turnover rates represent a real competitive market advantage.

# Challenges and Opportunities

Hopefully, now it is evident that neurodivergent workers represent a huge value proposition for many companies. But there's more because many of the challenges companies face today can be solved with a neurodivergent workforce.

## Challenge #1: Tight Labor Market

For many companies, turnover has become a secondary challenge/extension of the much more pressing issue of the labor shortage. Record low unemployment means a smaller than ever before pool of candidates. Yet, neurodivergent individuals still find themselves disproportionately outside the workforce. On the whole, the neurodivergent community has a 30% unemployment rate, and certain groups, like college graduates with autism, have unemployment rates up to 85%! Understanding the reasons behind these disparities requires further exploration in future articles. Nevertheless, the existence of a substantial untapped labor pool amid a clear demand for labor suggests a market failure. Embracing a neurodivergent workforce benefits not only individual companies but also the broader economy.

## Challenge #2: Slowing Innovation

Despite record-high numbers of employees, companies today often find themselves starved for new ideas. Why is it that with more people than ever working on solving today's most pressing challenges, innovation is stalling? There is no one reason, but an obvious one is homogeneity in thinking.

Some companies looked towards diversity to increase their creativity, citing that people that come from varied life experiences bring different perspectives and different ways of thinking. However, they often confound demographic diversity (i.e., race, gender, age), which has many other advantages for psychological diversity,

which actually produces more creative and innovative ideas. Psychological diversity, which leads to more creative and innovative ideas, can be achieved in various ways. However, hiring neurodivergent candidates offers a simple and efficient solution, ensuring the inclusion of diverse cognitive perspectives in the workforce.

### **Challenge #3: Reconciling with Calls for a Higher Purpose**

While not directly related to neurodiversity, it is undeniable that both consumers and prospective employees prioritize companies whose values align with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) efforts. According to a CNBC survey, 80% of respondents say they want to work for a company that values DEI efforts, and 59% of consumers say that it is important to them that the companies they buy from actively promote diversity and inclusion.

The extent to which a company's DEI efforts influence the end decisions of buyers and laborers can be debated; however, it is undeniable that many companies nowadays emphasize their DEI efforts. From changing the color of their logo for Pride Month to applying for B Corporation status, it is clear that many corporations feel it is in their economic best interest to care about Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion.

While some neurodiversity advocates distance themselves from the DEI sphere, not wanting to be seen as a PR tool or feel like they are being thrown a bone for their differences, it doesn't make economic sense for companies to hide their neurodiversity efforts. It is undeniable that a natural positive byproduct of a neurodivergent workforce is better brand reception. In short, it makes economic sense for companies to share their neurodiversity efforts,

## **Conclusion**

The advantages of neurodivergent workers are not widely recognized, and the barriers they face in the workforce extend beyond their relatively unknown benefits. Stigma, bias, and misunderstanding among neurotypicals are just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the reasons why neurodivergent individuals have trouble reaching their potential in the workforce. In the next article, we will delve into the challenges companies encounter when hiring neurodivergent individuals. By shedding light on these issues, we hope to foster greater understanding and pave the way for a more inclusive and productive future.