

The Challenges Companies Face Trying To Hire Neurodivergent Workers

Many companies are built around a particular culture and infrastructure that is near impossible to change. These systems that exist within all companies to keep them up and running are a natural byproduct of growth; they evolve with the company. However, as the company grows, so too does the inertia of these systems.

Often, this inertia does nothing more than supplant a company firmly in its field of expertise. It is a positive feedback loop where reliance on entrenched systems further entrenches these systems. However, for people that are Neurodivergent, the entrenchment of these systems can often mean a work environment that is fundamentally incompatible.

How Did This happen?

All organizations, old and new, large and small, face this challenge. In the name of profits, companies strive for efficiency. However, striving for efficiency entrenches systems optimized for one so-called “normal” ability; slowing down to consider designing accessible is a tough sell for any company, let alone a small and scrappy one. Inclusivity, on the occasions when it is considered, is a second thought, one which can be dealt with later.

Yet, still to this day, many neurodivergents are waiting for this elusive “later” to come. The reality is that the complexity of retroactively restructuring the systems that exist within a company increases exponentially with the size of the company. And without proper systems, a neurodivergent in a neurotypical company often is like trying to fit

a square peg into the circle hole. It is a self-defeating endeavor that only further alienates individuals with different abilities.

The Impact of Incompatibility

At this point, you may be wondering, “What's the big deal? What is specific to the systems at all companies which are fundamentally incompatible with people of different abilities?” The answer is implicit to the question: everything. From the hiring process to almost everything in a modern office, it was all designed around a neurotypical person.

And the big deal manifests in even bigger numbers. Neurodivergents are eight times as likely to be under-employed than Neurotypicals, and the unemployment rate for neurodivergents runs as high as 30%. Why is this relevant? Because this statistic might help frame the fact that, much like everything else in an office, everything about the hiring process was designed around the neurotypical, resulting in unintentional bias. This may manifest in Autistic applicants missing a nonverbal cue during an interview or Dyslexic applicants having a slight spelling error on their résumé.

And once hired, neurodivergent individuals often find themselves in an incompatible environment. They may be expected to be a cog in the machine, to not need “special” accommodations, but this is not the case. Anything from bright lights to ambient noise to font size may prevent a neurodivergent individual from performing at their best and often leads to neurodivergent burnout (a phenomenon that occurs when neurodivergent individuals attempt to conform to what neurotypical society expects from them).

The list of all the different things that make modern work and neurodivergent individuals incompatible is very long and is best-heard face-to-face from someone

you know who is neurodivergent. However, to give a sense of the scope of the problem, here are a few:

Office Environment

Lighting

Although the lighting in an office building is something most of us do not think about, it is often an intentional design feature. Cooler blue and white lighting has been shown to increase productivity and stimulate the neurotypical brain but can be overstimulating to the neurodivergent brain. Furthermore, Neurodivergent people are more likely to be sensitive to fluorescent lighting, with up to 50% of people with autism having a severe sensitivity to such lighting.

Noise

Many neurotypicals tune out background noise without even thinking. However, many neurodivergents simply cannot. The neurodivergent brain is wired to process sensory stimuli differently, which often means the inability to tune out a noisy coworker or a whirring microwave.

Non-traditional Work Styles

Both neurotypicals and neurodivergents often have unique ways of completing tasks. However, compared to the neurotypical, the 'quirks' of a neurodivergent can often be seen as more extreme and often less accommodated. Examples are often person-specific but can be anything from pacing while thinking to specific pre-work rituals.

Workplace Systems

Need To Always Be Available

Neurotypicals and Neurodivergents alike often find being required to constantly monitor their email or Microsoft Teams inbox to be distracting. However, the consequences are even more drastic for neurodivergent workers, as this can not only inhibit their hyper-focus but also reduce their performance as neurodivergents often find it especially mentally taxing to switch their focus, which can lead to anxiety and increased stress.

Socialization Expectations

For several reasons, many neurodivergents find it especially strenuous to socialize with neurotypical coworkers. Neurodivergent brains have to work overtime trying to pick up social cues and body language, which can be emotionally draining.

Inconsistent Workflow / Spontaneous Schedule

Many neurodivergent workers benefit from having a consistent routine. Unexpected changes in workflow can create a sense of uncertainty and make it challenging to establish a sense of stability and control over their work.

Lack of Understanding Among Coworkers

It is exceedingly difficult to change the way anyone communicates, including the neurotypical. Even with sensitivity training, neurotypicals will often continue to expect their neurodivergent coworkers to pick up on nonverbal cues, figurative speech, and body language. Neurodivergents often rely on explicit communication, which can create misunderstandings alienating neurodivergents and impacting overall performance.

Employee Pipelines

Candidate Screening

Many automated candidate screening tools have been primarily trained on neurotypical applicants. Because the way a neurodivergent person thinks, and therefore the way they write, is different, neurodivergent applicants being disproportionately screened out because the structure or content of their resumes are different than what automated screening tools expect.

Job Interviews

Interviewers are not immune to unconscious bias. They often draw conclusions based on their expectations for eye contact, handshakes, and ability to pick up on social cues. Furthermore, neurodivergent applicants often prefer clear instructions and have a harder time answering ambiguous questions about themselves often asked during job interviews.

Traditional Training Modes

While everyone learns best slightly differently, the ways in which most neurotypicals learn best are notably different from that of neurodivergents. Standardized training materials, which are created to best suit the learning modes of the neurotypical, inadvertently impede the learning process for neurodivergent individuals, leading to challenges in comprehending and retaining information.

Conclusion

Resolving the challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals in the workforce is a complex task that requires a comprehensive understanding from both employers and employees. First, companies must recognize and address the inherent incompatibilities between existing systems and the needs of neurodivergent individuals. Some companies, such as Microsoft and JP Morgan Chase, have already implemented programs aimed at leveraging neurodivergent talent with varying degrees of success. However, to fully unleash the potential of a neurodivergent workforce, it is crucial to address the challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals in the workplace. In the next article, we will delve into these challenges by following the story of an industry expert.