

# Challenges Neurodivergent people face in the Workforce

Manny always knew he was different, but it wasn't until he was in his forties when he discovered why: he was both Aspergers and ADHD. By that point in his life, Manny was already an accomplished technologist, systems strategist, and consultant. However, Manny's success was not without challenges. Manny's story, although unique in many ways, highlights some common challenges many neurodivergent individuals encounter in the workplace.

## Sensory Sensitivities And Overstimulation

Many Neurodivergent people face the problem of a workspace designed for the neurotypical. From the floor plan to the ceiling lights, the modern office unintentionally debilitates the neurodivergent. For Mr. Gomes, the office was often distracting, but working in a discordant environment wasn't new to Manny, he had done so all his life. Often, when someone doesn't realize they are neurodivergent, they aren't able to accommodate their abilities and perform at their best. Such was the case for Manny.

However, even if Manny did know which conditions his neurodivergent mind worked best under, the odds that his employer would get him the proper accommodations were slim. In fact, many companies actively frown on so-called 'special treatment'. For many neurodivergent workers, this means consistent suboptimal performance and unnecessary additional stress. This is despite the fact that according to one study, 56% of such accommodations were completely free, and almost none were over \$500.

## Acceptance Within The Workplace

Even still, the situation is a real catch-22 for neurodivergent workers: If they receive proper accommodations, they are labeled as 'abnormal' and 'self-important'. If they don't receive proper accommodations, they will struggle to do their work and are labeled as 'inconsistent' and 'fragile'. Manny inadvertently chose the ladder. He didn't quite know why some days he was a machine, and others he struggled to get even the most basic work done. However, at this point in his life, he was used to his own 'inconsistency' and thought it was his fault, blaming himself instead of his incompatible environment.

Addressing the stigma around accommodations through open conversations and sensitivity training seems like a potential solution. However, at least as of now, this is not a viable solution for many neurodivergents. Revealing their condition seemed to backfire often, as half of neurodivergent individuals who disclosed their condition to their employer reported regretting their decision later. Perhaps this is because innocent behaviors once overlooked suddenly become attributed to their "condition", making stigma and bias worse, not the other way around. This may explain why 75% of neurodivergent workers refrain from revealing their condition in the first place.

## Communication

Neurodivergent individuals often experience difficulties in social interactions and communication, which can present challenges in a professional setting. Navigating office politics, understanding non-verbal cues, and engaging in small talk can be particularly challenging for neurodivergent individuals. This struggle to conform to conventional social norms can sometimes result in feelings of isolation and exclusion.

This was no different for Manny, who would often receive "communication" as a point of improvement during his performance reviews. For Manny, Performance reviews

quickly went from pats on the back to being solely and entirely focused on these points of improvement. Manny relates his experience being an undiagnosed neurodivergent to the famous Einstein quote:

*“If you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid”*

Manny was the fish, and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to climb trees. Manny struggled with these points of improvement not because he wasn't trying to improve but because his brain was wired in a way that made communicating exceedingly difficult. This was especially frustrating since these points of improvement often revolved around non-work-related difficulties. Struggling to meet the expectations for a neurotypical encapsulates much of the challenges of neurodivergent individuals in the workplace. Although meant to be helpful for neurodivergents, these “points of improvement” often reiterate their neuro divergency, citing deficiencies in organization, flexibility, or collaboration. Whether it be a mental note or specifically enumerated as a “point of improvement”, in the eyes of ignorant bosses, neurodivergent individuals consistently fail to function like a neurotypical.

## **Burnout**

However, Manny isn't neurotypical, and he can never be neurotypical, no matter how hard he tries. But expectations don't change for neurodivergent workers, especially those who don't realize they are neurodivergent. So Manny continues to work trying to meet these points of improvement. But he can't seem to do it. He becomes exhausted and burnt out from the Sisyphean task of trying to be someone he is not.

But that is not where the story ends. Because with burnout comes anxiety about being burnt out, and with anxiety comes depression about being unable to function

normally. Neurodivergent burnout is not nearly as well known as it needs to be and is often misdiagnosed by medical practitioners.

And because neurodivergents frequently don't know what they are actually going through and what caused them to feel that way, the cycle inevitably repeats, and a short while later, they end up burnt out again.

Constant burnout breeds trauma around working in a world designed for the neurotypical, and at this point, many neurodivergent individuals, including Manny, are not just struggling with burnout but previous trauma from the vicious cycle that they don't quite understand. Many leave the workforce, thinking themselves incompatible with working for some inexplicable reason. This may explain the high unemployment rates of 30% for neurodivergent individuals (85% for people with Autism), as well as the sad reality that 29% of people with Autism, 30% of people with ADHD, and 20% of people with Dyslexia develop depression later in life (compared to a rate of around 5% among the general population).

Neurodivergent burnout cannot be given justice in just a few short paragraphs, but it is undeniably an essential part to understand the lives of many neurodivergent individuals, including Manny's. Manny, like many others, eventually realized how punishing operating in an environment hostile to the neurodivergent can be, but only once it was too late.

## **Lack of support**

While there is no single thing that can be changed to ameliorate all the aforementioned challenges a neurodivergent individual faces, a support system can go a long way. Because the problems many neurodivergent individuals face in the workforce are unique, they often are left without anyone who understands their situation. Because of this, the lack of a support system is often the breaking point for

many neurodivergent workers; without someone to go to, the challenges the neurodivergent employee faces only compound. On the flip side, a good support system can help neurodivergent employees better understand themselves and help them to develop strategies for their unique challenges. This might be why almost all “successful” attempts to hire neurodivergent employees and neurotypical employers include a support system. Although a bad support system is frequently part of the problem, a well-thought-out support system can be the saving grace when all else fails.

After Manny’s formal diagnosis, it didn’t take him long to figure out that a robust neurodivergent support system can prove decisive for the success of neurodivergent employees. Leveraging this knowledge, Manny left the workforce to start his own company, seeking to revolutionize technology work with teams composed solely of neurodivergents.

Manny recalls how, one day, the metrics for one of his best employees, Mr. T, were abysmal. He sat Mr. T down and almost immediately realized what was wrong: it wasn’t that Mr. T was finding the task difficult, his head was just noisy that day. Manny knew what he had to do. “Go home,” Manny reportedly told Mr. T. “Your job today is to get rest.” Seemingly out of habit, Mr. T fights back; he is all too used to hiding his neurodivergent-related struggles. But Manny persists, “This isn’t paid time-off or a sick day, just come back when you feel ready.”

A few days later, Mr. T comes back into the office. His metrics were off the charts for the next month, along with the whole team. Manny recalls a shift in the mood of the entire office: “It was like a weight was lifted off everyone’s shoulders”. They released the anxiety they carried from their experience in a neurotypical environment as they recognized that Manny understood them in a way their former neurotypical supervisors could never.

## **Conclusion**

Still to this day, Manny is dedicated to empowering neurodivergent workforces by countering the challenges he himself faced as a neurodivergent worker and supporting them in delivering the extraordinary value they are capable of. His story is not just another anecdote but part of the central narrative driving the neurodivergent working revolution. In the next article, we will delve into what the neurodivergent working revolution will look like, including the solutions to the challenges Manny and many more face today.