

Increase Development Inclusion for Neurodivergent Talent

by Alison Smith

Learning and development could have a significant role in creating an inclusive environment for neurodivergent talent. In this article, L&D leaders will learn about the meaning of neurodiversity, why it is valuable for their organizations, and what actions they can take to increase inclusion.



Poor understanding of neurodivergent talent's potential among employers leaves many qualified people unemployed or underemployed, while organizations lose out on the potential value of a neurodiverse workforce.

What is Neurodiversity?

Broadly speaking, neurodiversity refers to the variety of ways human brains are wired and the associated behavioral traits. Neurodivergent individuals are generally referred to as individuals whose brain functions differ from those who are neurologically typical (neurotypical). These differences can include dyspraxia, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyscalculia, autism spectrum disorders and Tourette syndrome, among others. It is estimated that up to 20% of the global population is neurodivergent, and in one U.S. study, one in 44 eight-year-old children were identified as being autistic.^{1,2} Neurodiversity in the workforce may be greater than currently estimated, and it may become more visible as neurodivergent conditions are better understood.

Neurodiversity is often erroneously equated with autism, although it refers to a broader range of neurological conditions. While this research addresses neurodiversity in general, many of our examples focus on autism. This is because we have found more examples of organizations taking formal measures to support employees with autism than those with other forms of neurodiversity.

Neurodivergent Talent Is Needed and Beneficial

Organizations are struggling to hire and retain talent. Sixty-five percent of recruiting staff say it's harder now to source talent from key segments than it was before the pandemic, and 65% also say it's harder to get candidates to accept offers.³ Time to fill has increased and the quality of available candidates has declined. In another recent survey, 14% of employees said they were actively seeking other employment, while 56% said they were open to new job opportunities.⁴ Yet even in this tight, competitive labor market, organizations often overlook neurodivergent talent that can bring a wealth of strengths organizations need. How often have you been asked to "think differently"? Organizations know that, to drive business growth and success, they require employees with creativity and innovation, who can "think differently." Neurodivergent employees, by definition, think differently from their neurotypical peers, and their unique perspectives can often contribute to solving problems in innovative ways. Of course, neurodivergent employees are individuals, each with their own traits, abilities and interests, and employers should not make assumptions about what they can or can't do. At the same time, the

Figure 1. Sample Common Strengths by Type of Neurodiversity

Varies by Individual



Source: Adapted From the Work of Mary Colley and Nancy Doyle

various forms of neurodiversity often include behaviors and experiences that can be leveraged as strengths in the workplace (see Figure 1).

Neurodivergent Talent Is Underleveraged

Despite the potential for neurodivergent talent to bridge critical skills gaps, this talent segment is underleveraged. Employment outcomes for neurodivergent individuals are understudied, but in the U.K., for example, only 29% of working-age autistic people are employed.⁵ And this is not for lack of a desire to work: In a 2016 survey, the U.K. National Autistic Society found that, of the autistic adults in the U.K. who were not in employment, 77% wanted to be.⁶

To leverage neurodivergent talent, organizations must not only attract and recruit this cohort but also ensure they can work successfully and stay. Data shows neurodivergent employees feel they lack support in the workplace to perform at their best; 81% of neurodivergent employees feel they could be better supported by their employer.⁷ Meanwhile, only 32% of employees agree their organization finds ways to encourage underrepresented groups within the organization to develop new skills.⁷

Six Key Actions to Increase Development Inclusion

Gartner has identified six actions L&D leaders can take, in partnership with the rest of the HR

Figure 2. Sample Common Difficulties by Type of Neurodiversity

Varies by Individual



Source: Adapted From D.L. Ott, E. Russo and M. Moeller, "Neurodiversity, Equity, and Inclusion in MNCs," AIB Insights, April 2022

function, to increase development inclusion for neurodivergent employees.

1. Focus on Equity, not Equality

A first key step is to understand the difference between equality and equity, and why it's important to aim for equity. Giving each employee the same resources and conditions might ensure equality, but it won't provide a level playing field. The workplace environment can be daunting for some neurodivergent individuals, both physically and emotionally. Equity focuses on awareness and accommodation of the additional difficulties a neurodivergent employee may face, in order to create that more level playing field.

Some neurodivergent employees require certain adjustments to accommodate their needs. However, organizations that have made those adjustments tell us these tend to be manageable, relatively inexpensive, and that the benefits of hiring these individuals far outweigh the potential costs. Many of these accommodations also have a spillover effect, and organizations are finding they benefit many neurotypical employees too.

Different types of neurodiversity often come with common difficulties (see Figure 2). It's important to note, however, that difficulties will vary on an individual level, and there is a lot of nuance in how neurodiverse conditions manifest. For example, while employees with ADHD might struggle with inattention at times,

many also demonstrate hyperfocus. The autistic adults in the U.K. who were not in employment, 77% wanted to be.⁶

2. Treat Each Neurodivergent Employee as an Individual

Another important step is to develop awareness of the variety of ways neurodiversity may present even within a single type. Let's take autism as an example. Autism is more than just a "spectrum." It may not present in the way you expect based on your understanding of what autism "typically" looks like, or based on how it presents in autistic people you may know. Each autistic individual has a different combination of strengths and challenges, and each of those to varying degrees (see Figure 3). One reason autistic people sometimes hide their diagnosis

is out of fear that others might limit them based on incorrect assumptions. So it's important to let neurodivergent employees tell you their strengths and needs rather than assuming.

3. Raise Awareness With Managers

A third action L&D leaders can take is to raise awareness of neurodiversity with potential managers of neurodivergent talent, their teams and the employee population more generally. Awareness is an important first step toward acceptance and inclusion.

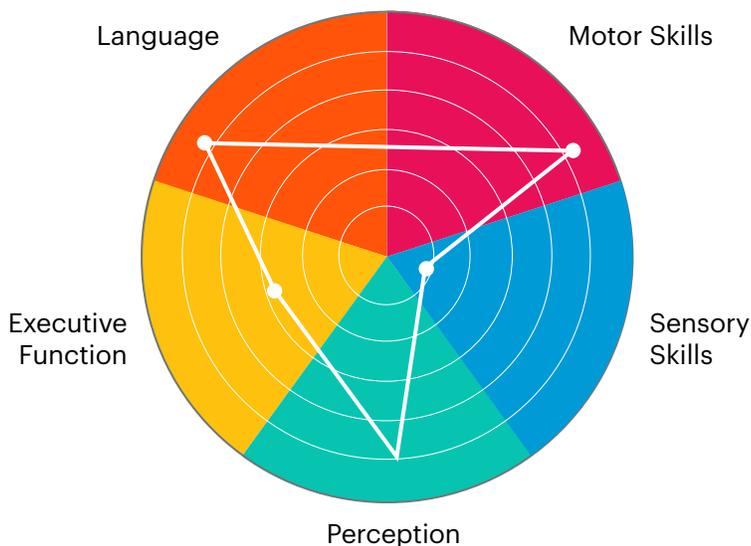
However, awareness of neurodiversity, how it might manifest and how neurodivergent employees can be supported is lacking. Research from O2 shows 68% of leaders feel neurodiversity should be celebrated in the workplace and that

Figure 3. The Autism Spectrum

People Often Think the Autism Spectrum Looks Linear



In Reality It Can Look More Like a Wheel



Source: Adapted From the Work of Rebecca Burgess

neurodivergent employees can bring real value to the organization. However, 64% report having little or no understanding of people’s cognitive differences.⁷ This illustrates the important role L&D can play in building awareness through training.

Neurodivergent employees should be included in the design of this training so they can comment, validate or correct the guidance the organization provides. This makes them part of the awareness strategy, not simply beneficiaries of it.

4. Equip Managers With Concrete Guidance

Another step L&D leaders can take is to equip managers of neurodivergent talent with concrete guidance for supporting their neurodivergent direct reports. Table 1 gives an example of what that could look like for communication guidance and focuses on three C’s — clear, concise and complete. These are often attributes of effective communication in general, regardless of the audience, but they can be especially important in communicating with neurodivergent individuals.

Case in Point:
Westpac Group’s Awareness
Training Sessions for All



Westpac Group

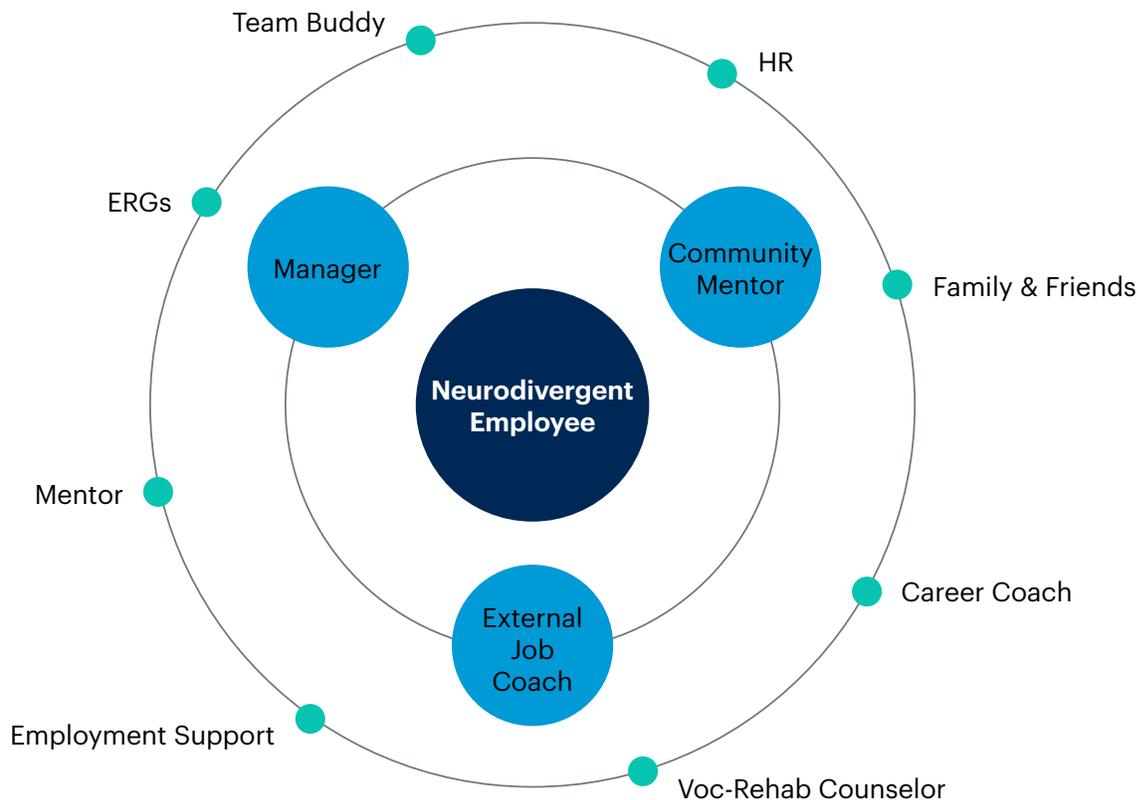
Westpac Group runs neurodiversity awareness training for both managers and employees, designed in partnership with Specialisterne Australia. Before successful neurodivergent candidates start with Westpac Group, their people leader and team complete autism awareness training to better understand how they can create a supportive environment for their new colleagues. Westpac Group also conducts one-on-one training with people leaders to help them understand any specific adjustments that can be made to support their new starter. This includes communication styles and any obligations to maintain privacy for those who don’t want to share information about their neurodiversity. The training also shows how leaders can play an active role in making the workplace comfortable and productive for their new team members.

Table 1. Sample Communication Tips for Managers of Neurodivergent Talent

Attribute	Do’s	Don’ts
Clear	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be specific about who needs to do what by when. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be ambiguous. • Provide mixed messages. • Express emotionally (but do state your emotions).
Concise	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Document work, asks and actions in writing. • Provide feedback with specifics of what is and isn’t working. • Make the purpose of a meeting or discussion clear. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell a story to make your point. • Share copious amounts of information that is only marginally material to the discussion. • Cover more than three topics in one setting (i.e., information overload).
Complete	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate expectations using outcomes, timelines and guardrails. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assume understanding without asking if more information is needed. • Give guidance to get more information from an unspecified source.

Source: Gartner

Figure 4. The Employee Support Circle



Source: Gartner

Again, not all neurodivergent employees work best under the same conditions, so use the information below only as a general guide.

5. Build and Implement Support Circles

For some neurodivergent individuals, transitioning and adjusting to a workplace environment can be challenging. From a socialization perspective, meeting many new team members can be an uncomfortable and even overwhelming experience for some.

While training has its place, it can be difficult to scale specialized assistance. L&D leaders can help by building out a support network or “circle” for neurodivergent talent with the creation of new roles, responsibilities and groups. It can also

include tailoring and tweaking any such existing mechanisms. Drawing on lessons learned from successful neurodiversity programs in a variety of large enterprises, the support circle in Figure 4 is a good example to follow.

During new employee onboarding and the first 90 days, it is important neurodivergent employees are not overwhelmed by too many new contacts too soon. The most important roles early on are the manager, the external job coach (where available) and the community mentor (where available). Further on, neurodivergent employees will need to engage with some of the roles from the wider circle. It’s important to ensure clear responsibilities for each role within the support circle are defined.

Fujitsu is one organization that has recognized neurodivergent individuals can bring a unique

perspective to the workspace and a skill set that can drive significant competitive advantage, and has worked to ensure they are well supported.

While this example is not limited to learning scenarios, this type of support system can be particularly helpful when employees are learning during the onboarding process.

6. Provide Hybrid-Specific Support

Some neurodivergent employees say they find aspects of working in a hybrid environment harder, while some find it easier. Hybrid-specific support that L&D leaders could provide for neurodivergent employees might include:

- In virtual meetings and training sessions, make camera (eye contact) optional or alternate with phone calls to avoid virtual meeting fatigue and overwhelming individuals.
- Build regular breaks into longer training sessions.
- Increase regular manager check-ins, not to micromanage, but to support learning.

Such measures would also be helpful for the average neurotypical employee. As always, be guided by your neurodivergent employees regarding what they need.

¹ [Neurodiversity at Work: A Biopsychosocial Model and the Impact on Working Adults](#), British Medical Bulletin

² [Autism Prevalence Higher in CDC's ADDM Network](#), U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

³ 2021 Gartner Recruiting and Sourcing Survey. This survey, conducted from August through September 2021, polled 247 frontline recruiters, sourcers and recruiting managers. Respondents were asked about their workload, recruiting outcomes, responsibilities and time spend. Respondents were distributed among 26 countries and 23 industries.

⁴ 2022 Gartner New Talent Landscape and Career Pathing Survey. This survey was conducted to better understand employees' attitudes toward the hypercompetitive labor market and their feelings on career pathing in hybrid roles. The survey was conducted online from 28 February through 23 March 2022 and contained responses from 3,370 employees with representation from various regions, industries and functions. Survey design and development, administration and data analysis were done by Gartner's HR Practice research team.

⁵ [Outcomes for Disabled People in the U.K.: 2021](#), Office for National Statistics.

⁶ [Government Must Tackle the Autism Employment Gap](#), National Autistic Society.

⁷ [Employers Urged to Provide Support for Neurodiverse Colleagues as Remote Working Looks Set to Stay](#), Virgin Media O2.

Case In Point: Fujitsu's BuddyConnect Fujitsu



Fujitsu has worked with specialists in autism and neurodivergent individuals to develop a smartphone app called BuddyConnect to help individuals access support at work. The app enables the development of a trusted relationship with a buddy. The app allows neurodivergent talent to report their well-being to their buddy — and manager — enabling them to receive support as needed.

