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Neurodiversity in the Workplace

By **Sydney Elaine Butler (They/Them)**
Founder of Accessible Creates

Have you heard the term neurodiversity being used recently? Both in the workplace and in your everyday life? The term is being used more than ever before. However, the term was first coined by Judy Singer, an Australian sociologist in 1998 to recognize that everyone's brain develops in a unique way. In this article, I will cover what neurodiversity is, types of neurodiversity, neurodiversity in the workplace, how to ask for support if you are neurodivergent, how to support neurodiversity in the workplace, and briefly how I came to be the founder of Accessible Creates.

What is Neurodiversity?

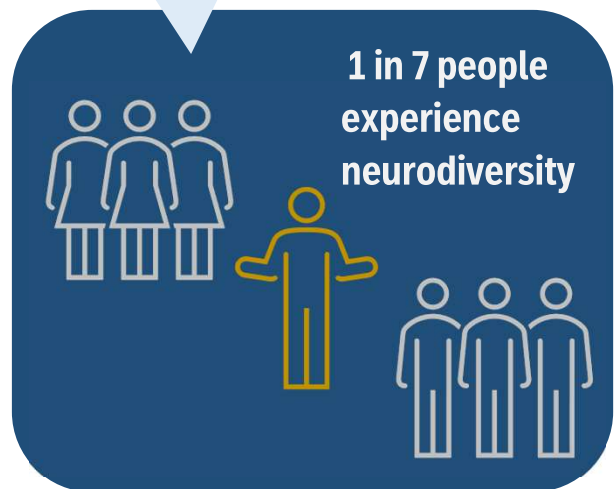
Neurodiversity describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways; there is no one "right" way of thinking, learning, behaving, and differences are not viewed as deficits. Previously it has been thought that people who experience neurodiversity, experience deficits as a result, and while it can pose problems and challenges for those who experience it, it should not be seen as a deficit. Neurodiversity is a critical part of diversity in the workplace that often goes ignored.

Types of Neurodiversity

When people think of neurodiversity, they usually think of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and ADHD. However, there are so many more types under the types of neurodiversity umbrella as illustrated in the image 'Types of Neurodiversity'.

There are so many types of neurodiversity which include but are not limited to ADHD, Anxiety, OCD, Trauma, Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia, Mental Health, Development Disabilities, ASD, Auditory Processing, Epilepsy, Learning Disabilities and, Sensory Integration Disorder.

Many people use the terms neurodivergent, and neurodiverse interchangeably. However, the term neurodivergent refers to one person whereas the term neurodiverse refers to a group of people who are neurodivergent. People also use the term neurodistinct.



Types of Neurodiversity

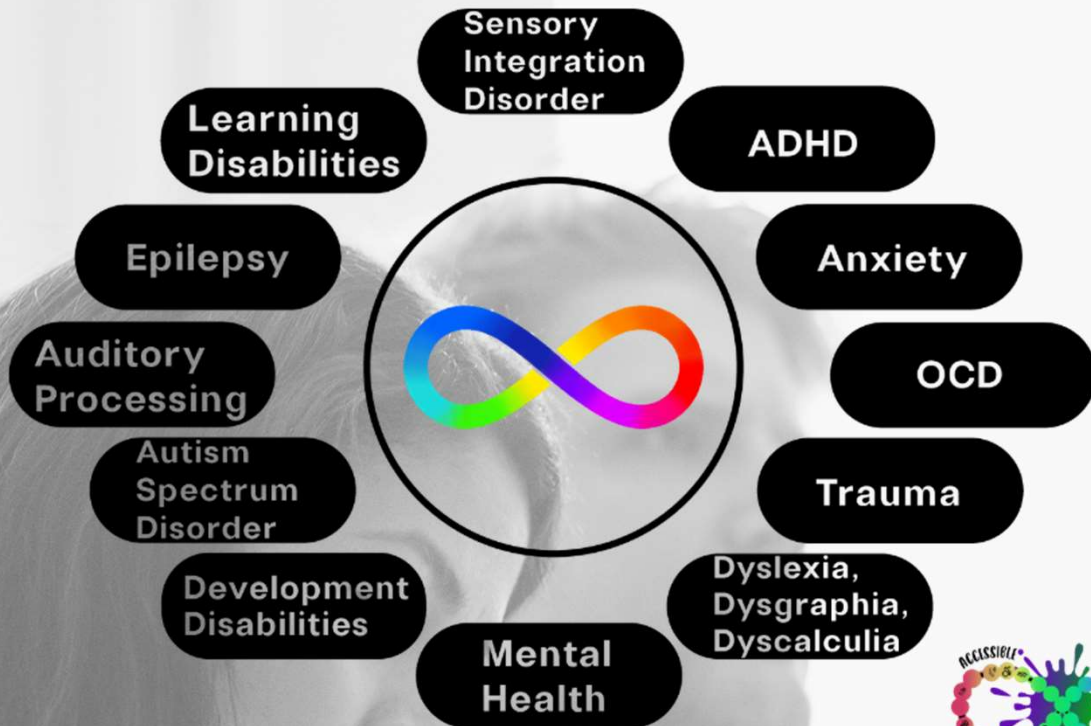


Image: Accessible Creates (2022).



What is Neurodiversity in the Workplace?

Neurodiversity in the workplace is understanding how people who are neurodiverse show up in the workplace, and the barriers they experience to enter the workforce.

We all deserve support and many neurodiverse people in workplaces have had to hide their dimension of diversity for various reasons, E.g. fear of losing their jobs.

Before we talk about support, let's talk briefly about the barriers to entering the workplace.



Barriers Include

Resumes

- Some neurodiverse individuals have trouble communicating their skills and experiences in a written format
- Lack of experience in the area they are applying for
- Employers not leveraging volunteering, education, and lived experience

Lack of Understanding from companies

- Processing time to answering questions: Neurodiverse people have a different processing time (varies from person to person)
- Indirect questions can be a challenge for a neurodiverse individual. For e.g. “What is your weakness?” A neurodivergent person may answer that literally and say what they are bad at. However, in the context of an interview this question needs to be handled not literally but tactfully.

Lack of Understanding from companies

Companies are not aware of how their processes or practices are not inclusive and accessible for neurodiverse individuals.

Communication Differences

We all communicate differently. However, in the context of neurodiverse individuals, subtle communication cues might be interpreted differently or missed. When communicating with neurodivergent candidates it's important to be aware of appropriate use of direct vs. subtle communications and minimize subtle communications.

How to Ask for Support (Neurodiverse Individuals)

Most neurodiverse individuals know what they need when it comes to support that will help them thrive in the work environment. Even if you do know what you need to be supported in the workplace, sometimes the challenge is “how” to ask for that support. Here are a few tips that might be useful:

- Know you do not have to disclose your condition
- Be transparent and open about challenges that come your way at work
- Disclose your condition- Only if you wish and think it will help
- Foster a good relationship with your supervisor and team members
- Ask for support as soon as possible



How to Support Neurodiversity in the Workplace

Managers and co-workers play a critical role in supporting neurodiversity in the workplace. The roles are different. Managers work on developing their employees and ensuring they complete their job duties as well as providing an inclusive culture. Co-workers contribute to the overall work environment and can be an ally as well as play a role in the culture. It's important that both managers and co-workers listen to what the neurodiverse people say about how they want to be supported. Here are a few suggestions for managers and co-workers to be mindful of when working with neurodiverse people.

M A N A G E R S

- Foster a relationship between all employees
- Check in with the neurodivergent employee daily or weekly (Agreed upon Basis)
- Listen intently when a neurodivergent employee addresses their challenges or struggles
- When someone discloses, take what they say at face value
- Accommodation:
 - Understand Accommodation is different for everyone
 - Understand Accommodation looks different daily

C O - W O R K E R S

- Educate yourself on Neurodiversity
- Do not compare them to others you know who experience Neurodiversity
- Ask Questions
- Help when a person asks for help and not when you think they need help
- Do not belittle their struggles
 - Do not say it is because of their neurodivergent condition
 - Do not question that they could do it before and not now



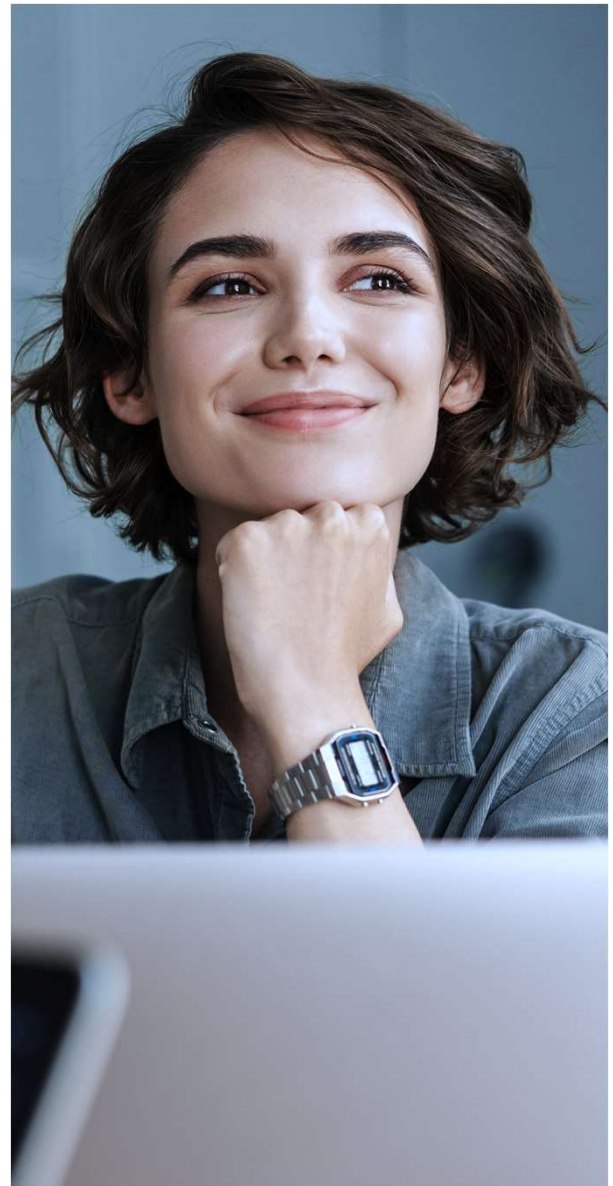
Final Thoughts

As someone with lived experience as a neurodivergent individual, I encourage you to continue to learn more about neurodiversity and provide safe spaces for all employees in the workplace. We all experience neurodiversity differently, as we are all human and have a range of experiences that make up who we are. HR plays a vital role in supporting all employees in the workplace including neurodiverse and disabled employees. However, a lot of time HR does not realize or know the importance of providing accessible workplaces and providing accommodations to ensure that people can succeed in their job and job duties.

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As a neurodivergent individual, over the years, I have observed numerous gaps within HR. It has impacted the Neurodiverse and Disable Community. I encourage greater dialogue between HR and these communities as well as, more education and awareness to bridge the gaps. Both HR and the Neurodiverse and Disable Community need to come together to ensure that hiring managers and other employees are respectful and accepting of the needs of these individuals.



Sydney Elaine Butler has the lived experience of living with some of the neurodivergent conditions mentioned above in the diagram such as autism and complex PTSD. They started Accessible Creates after understanding that there was a gap in HR being accessible for people like them after working and studying HR for a couple of years, and made it their mission to make HR practices more accessible for all.

Embracing Authenticity: My Journey at the Intersection of Disability and Employment

By **Lisa Kelly (She/Her), Business Development
Manager, Ontario Chamber of Commerce**

I find myself working at the crossroads of disability and employment, a place I never intended to be. After 25 years of running my own consulting business, I made a midlife career change into employment counseling. Little did I know that this shift would open my eyes to a stark reality: many of my clients had undisclosed disabilities and were confronted with numerous societal barriers limiting career choices and opportunities.

Throughout most of my life, I've carried a diagnosed medical condition. I had always chosen to conceal or "mask" it, unwilling to embrace my identity as a person with a disability. The lack of relatable role models and media portrayals that often reduced disability to helpless characters further fueled my apprehension. However, my perspective underwent a transformation when I accepted a job in an open-concept work environment.

Cubicles and open offices have become a contemporary trend in the workforce, and as much as I aesthetically appreciate the look, they aren't conducive to my productivity. Ambient noise can make it challenging to concentrate, acting as a constant distraction that left me feeling fatigued and overwhelmed. The diminished sense of privacy added to my dissonance and distress.

Soon after I started, frustration overcame me, and I fled the office, coatless, in distress. My manager noticed and asked if I was struggling. We collaborated on implementing straightforward yet highly effective accommodations, such as a quieter office section and more frequent breaks. Later, we added noise-canceling headsets and the option to work from home when necessary.

This positive change prompted me to re-evaluate my decision to mask my disability. Masking had come at the cost of my physical and mental well-being, but I had been afraid of jeopardizing my career. I carried a sense of embarrassment about my disability, fearing that my managers, clients, and colleagues might see me as incapable of handling the responsibilities of a senior position. The toll it took on me was immense, leaving me stressed, exhausted, and struggling with low self-esteem. I often felt excluded.

The traditional medical model of disability, which labels it as a limitation or impairment, didn't resonate with me. My experience, along with a growing number of people, views disability as a mismatch between our arbitrary workplace structures and how individuals experience the world.



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The concept of 'mismatches' is powerful. Mismatches aren't a personal feature, and can be addressed by removing barriers, providing tools, or altering the way we do things to enable everyone to work effectively. Mismatches arise frequently due to the arbitrary nature of many of our workplace procedures and policies. Before the pandemic, remote work for many seemed inconceivable, but we now know it makes some employees happier and more productive. When we address mismatched interactions, it's called an accommodation.

At the age of 50, I decided to disclose my disability to my manager, explaining how noise affected me. I didn't need to provide proof of my disability or share personal health details. The choice to disclose is deeply personal and should be respected. Disclosing enabled me to better identify how the workplace could be adapted to suit my needs. Ultimately, it led to significant productivity gains for both me and my employer, offering a newfound sense of authenticity I had never experienced before.

If you choose to disclose, it's important to communicate clearly and honestly, avoiding defensiveness or apology. While some may shy away from the word "disability," choosing euphemisms only perpetuates the discomfort. I use the simplest, clearest word I know - "disability."

I now embrace my disability as I do other aspects of my identity, and I often reflect on how fortunate I was to work in an open-concept environment that compelled me to request the accommodations I needed to thrive in the workplace. My journey at the intersection of disability and employment has taught me invaluable lessons and reinforced the power of authenticity.



Lisa Kelly is a Business Development Manager with the Ontario Chamber of Commerce. Her 30+ year career spans business outreach, consulting on diversity, employment and disability, program development, program management and training.

From the Newsstand

Highlights from WINS' Living Fully with Disabilities Webinar, Oct 19 & Nov 16, 2023

"It was a great session and I certainly learned new things. I look forward to the next one."

Karolina K., DEI Manager, Kinaxis

"I attended WINS' webinar by Lisa Kelly, highlighting the importance of open discussions about disability. I found the webinar to be full of useful information and resources for accommodation. My knowledge and mindset concerning how to acknowledge 'invisible disabilities' have evolved as I've shifted my focus from labels to individual support needs for empowerment. It gave me a new perspective to view disability as a mismatch in interactions, and to address societal and environmental factors in order to remove barriers for people with disabilities and providing tools for inclusive workplaces. I highly recommend WINS' webinars."

Alina A. Employment Counsellor/Mentoring Coach Team Lead, JVS Toronto

View Lisa Kelly's Webinar on  YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JlOqX1d5TLo&t=519s>

View Aiden Lee's Webinar on  YouTube

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9pWsdh2wxlc>

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