Unlocking The Neurodiversity Advantage In The Workplace

By Julia Dhar, April 2025, Forbes

In today's complex, innovation-driven world, fostering diversity is a strategic imperative, a point that was driven home globally on Dec. 3 when United Nations observed International Day for Persons with Disabilities.

While diversity discussions historically have focused on race, gender, and cultural background, many employers have started to focus on another previously marginalized group: the neurodiverse community, people whose brains are wired differently than neurotypical individuals. This diverse group includes those with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and a wide range of other differences.

It's a topic I often discuss with my colleague Johanna Benesty, who claims that embracing neurodiverse teaming unlocks competitive advantage. She provides three strong arguments:
1) Because of the unique ways in which neurodivergent individuals see things and approach challenges, neurodiversity offers a reservoir of untapped talent potential in specific domains.
2) The unique brains of our neurodivergent colleagues create new opportunities for organizations to improve teaming, combining the strengths of neurodivergent and neurotypical thinkers into a team more powerful than one consisting of neurotypical-thinkers alone. In the same way that neurodiversity is often referred to as a "hidden disability," Benesty argues, for some individuals. it also can obfuscate superpowers – capabilities or attributes that allow an individual to perform far above average on a certain dimension.
3) By better understanding the neurodivergent among us, we better understand everyone with whom we work or interact.

According to genetics specialists at the National Institutes of Health, "an estimated 15-20% of the world's population exhibits some form of neurodivergence." And, they all bring unique perspectives and strengths to their tasks. Yet, they are vastly underappreciated and underutilised in most workplaces.

Recognising and embracing such individuals not only supports inclusion but also offers organisations a powerful path to unlocking productivity, innovation, and resilience.

As Robert D. Austin and Gary P. Pisano, professors at Ivey Business School and Harvard Business School, respectively, noted in Harvard Business Review a few years back, "Many people with these disorders have higher-than-average abilities" and possess "special skills in pattern recognition, memory, or mathematics."

Yet, it has been estimated that unemployment and under-employment among those with neurodiverse talents may be as high as 85% to 90%—due, in many cases, to the nature of the recruitment and hiring processes, which often involve networking and behavioural interviews.

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Adaptation Required, Results Worth the Effort

Adapting workplaces to accommodate neurodiverse individuals can initially require managers and teams to adjust workflows and communication. These adaptations may temporarily impact productivity, but research by Pisano and others shows the long-term returns can be substantial.

For example, JPMorgan Chase's Autism at Work program reported up to 48% higher productivity in specific roles filled by neurodivergent employees, demonstrating that neurodiversity can be a catalyst for high performance.

And SAP's Autism at Work program, which began more than a decade ago, now includes more than 160 employees across 25 job types in 14 countries. It is credited with sparking productivity and innovation gains, as well as helping to foster a more empathetic, engaged workplace.

Neurodiverse Strengths

Neurodiverse individuals bring a range of unique abilities to the workplace, including:

Intense Focus: Many individuals with autism or ADHD demonstrate remarkable concentration, often referred to as "hyperfocus," which enables them to deliver exceptional results, especially in complex tasks.

Pattern Recognition: Autistic individuals, in particular, may excel in recognising patterns in large data sets, making them especially valuable in analytical and technical roles.

Sensory Awareness: Heightened sensory perception is extremely valuable in fields like design and quality control, where attention to detail is essential.

Empathy and Emotional Insight: Contrary to stereotypes, neurodiverse individuals, especially those with ADHD, often display profound empathy, strengthening collaboration and team cohesion.

Creative Problem-Solving and Adaptive Learning: Neurodiverse thinkers frequently approach challenges from non-linear perspectives, contributing fresh insights and adaptability to problem-solving.

By focusing on such strengths, organisations can move beyond stereotypes, recognising the untapped potential within neurodivergent employees.

Adopt A Neurodiversity Agenda

For organisations to harness neurodiverse talent effectively, thoughtful strategies are essential. Here are some suggestions, both big and small, that can help your organisation help neurodivergent individuals thrive:

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Make neurodiversity a central part of your broader hiring and workforce program.
Embrace universal design in the workplace by including closed seating and focus rooms, since open seating can be a sensory challenge for neurodiverse individuals, and by offering flexible spaces, noise-canceling options, or alternative lighting to reduce sensory overload and enhance comfort. These and other measures can lower barriers to access and normalize the learning and working needs of neurodiverse colleagues.

Make reasonable accommodations accessible and user-friendly. Reasonable accommodations, or workplace adjustments that enable employees with disabilities to perform the essential functions of their jobs, are critical, enabling productivity and showing neurodiverse employees that they are heard and valued. Accommodations could include speech to text software, closed captioning on virtual meetings, ergonomic office tools, or strategically timed breaks in the workday.

Train managers for inclusive leadership, equipping them with the tools necessary to understand neurodivergent strengths and potential. Awareness training can help leaders see neurodiversity as a source of competitive advantage rather than a challenge to be managed.

Activate neurodiverse talents by aligning neurodiverse individuals' roles with their unique capabilities. Examples include assigning tasks requiring meticulous attention to detail or creative problem-solving and purposefully balancing neurodivergent and neurotypical team members to create symbiotic, high-performing teams with complementary skills.

It's essential to remember that neurodiversity exists on a spectrum, meaning all of us exhibit unique cognitive traits to some degree. Embracing neurodiverse team members who may be further along this spectrum encourages managers and leaders to unlock the hidden potential within everyone.
As my colleague Hillary Wool, co-founder of AccessAbility@BCG, told me: "Thoughtful management of neurodiverse individuals is good management, period. It means considering how you can harness the potential of your employee and meet their needs—partnering with them to think creatively about what tools, accommodations, or working norms may help them deliver their best work and feel valued for their contributions."

Unlocking the neurodiversity advantage requires an intentional strategy and often additional effort, but the rewards—ranging from increased productivity and innovation to a richer, more inclusive workplace—are worth it.

By focusing on individuals' strengths and creating environments that support neurodiversity, your organization will not only gain from the talents of neurodivergent employees, but from a universally more dynamic, capable workforce.

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The Business Case For Neurodivergent Leadership

By Jennifer Jay Palumbo, February 2025, Forbes

Diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives have long focused on gender, race and ethnicity. But there's a crucial piece of the puzzle that organizations are only beginning to recognize: neurodiversity. With 53% of Gen Z now self-identifying as neurodivergent, according to Deloitte's 2023 Gen Z and Millennial Survey, investing in neurodivergent talent is not just a moral imperative—it's a business one.

"The future of work is going to need to shift to be more flexible," says Rebekah Shrestha, Executive Director of the Belfer Center for Innovation & Social Impact at the 92nd Street Y (92NY). "Neurodivergent leaders can lead the way in creating new workplace modalities and norms that will be beneficial to all employees."

The data backs her up. Research from Harvard Business Review shows that neurodivergent employees when supported appropriately, can be 30% more productive than their neurotypical peers. Yet, the same study finds that only 10% of companies have formal neuroinclusion policies in place.
Recognising this gap, the Belfer Center recently launched the first-ever fellowship program designed specifically for neurodivergent women leaders. The Neurodivergent Leaders Cohort is an initiative that addresses both the opportunities and challenges faced by neurodivergent women in leadership roles.

"We focused on supporting neurodivergent women leaders because there were no similar programs that existed to support these leaders," says Shrestha. "Rising levels of diagnosis in women, particularly later in life, showed us that the need for this type of program is large and growing."

The fellowship includes a redesigned curriculum, best practices for inclusive leadership and mentorship from neurodivergent leaders and allies. The 2025 cohort consists of 46 fellows, 15 of whom are part of the Neurodivergent Leaders Cohort. These fellows come from diverse sectors—business, technology, law, medicine and media—showcasing the broad impact neurodivergent leaders can have across industries.

The Leadership Gap: Why Neurodivergent Women Are Left Behind

Despite the known benefits of neurodiverse workplaces, many neurodivergent women still face significant barriers. They're often labeled as "problematic" or "overbearing," masking their identities to fit in. The lack of understanding of neurodivergent communication styles—such as directness, aversion to eye contact or sensory sensitivities—can lead to missed leadership opportunities.

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"It's hard enough to advance as a female leader," Shrestha explains. "For neurodivergent female leaders, it can feel like adding a layer of difference will be too much. Our workplaces are designed for a very rigid definition of leadership. Deviating from that norm in any way can feel risky."

The fellowship tackles this head-on, helping participants harness their strengths, identify areas where accommodations may be needed and develop self-advocacy skills. This is critical, as research from ADDitude Magazine reveals that 79% of neurodivergent women report experiencing burnout—often due to sensory overload, inflexible work environments and lack of support.

Rethinking The Workplace: From Accommodations To Inclusion

Creating an inclusive workplace for neurodivergent employees isn't just about accommodations—it's about rethinking how work happens. Here are some practical steps organisations can take:

1. Advance Communication: Share agendas, floor plans and event details in advance.
2. Flexible Work Environments: Allow remote work, flexible hours and personalized workspaces.
3. Diverse Feedback Channels: Provide multiple ways to receive and give feedback, ensuring employees can choose the method that aligns with their strengths.
4. Sensory Support: Encourage noise-canceling headphones, earplugs and sensory tools as part of standard workplace resources.

"We so often see asking for accommodations as a negative," Shrestha says. "But it's actually an employee advocating for their productivity—that's a positive!"

Leadership Beyond The Traditional Mold

The need for neuroinclusive leadership extends beyond individual accommodations. It's about reshaping what leadership looks like—and neurodivergent women are leading the charge.

"Women are given one model for leadership that is EQ- and diplomacy-driven," says Shrestha. "That isn't authentic for many women—there are so many ways to be an incredible leader. I hope that this fellowship sparks more programs like it and begins to shift our workplaces to be more expansive about what leadership looks like."

Isabella Ghassemi-Smith, Head of the Aurora Tech Award at inDrive, agrees. "Women in leadership positions still face systemic challenges. Even though they've fought their way to the table, it still isn't built for them."

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According to the Women in FTSE 100 2022 report by Cranfield School of Management, women hold only 6 to 7% of executive roles in FTSE 100 companies. This challenge is compounded for neurodivergent women, who often face bias not just for their gender but for how they think and work.

"The short story is we'll see a growing trend of women building their tables," Ghassemi-Smith adds. "With remote work, the gig economy and social media, more women will not only sit at the table but start creating their own."

Building A Future Of Inclusion

The 92NY Women inPower fellowship is just one example of how organizations can lead the way in neuroinclusion. But change must happen at all levels—from recruitment and onboarding to promotion and leadership development.

Ghassemi-Smith emphasizes practical, results-driven steps organizations can take:

1. Performance-Based Promotion Structures: Ensure advancement is based on results, not biased criteria.
2. Equal Parental Leave: Create policies that don't penalize women's career advancement.
3. Sponsorship Opportunities: Men must actively champion women for leadership roles, not just other women.
4. Psychological Support: Provide resources that build confidence, negotiation skills, and resilience.

"The biggest thing is understanding how many folks in an organization are neurodivergent and that they may need to do things a bit differently to perform their best," Shrestha explains. "Building inclusive practices into business as usual helps everyone bring their best to the workplace."

A Movement, Not A Moment

Investing in neurodiverse talent is more than a DEI initiative—it's a path toward innovation, productivity and resilience. As more organizations follow the lead of programs like the Women inPower fellowship, the ripple effect will transform not just individual careers but entire industries.

"My advice for this shift is simple," says Ghassemi-Smith. "Get out of your way. Now is the time to build for yourself. Because if we keep waiting for the table to change, we're on someone else's timeline."

For companies and leaders ready to embrace the future of work, investing in neurodivergent talent isn't just the right thing to do—it's the smart thing to do.

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Understanding Neurodivergent Conditions

Condition	Key Brain Areas Affected	Neurochemical Differences	Main Symptoms / Challenges	Typical Strengths
ADHD (Attention-Deficit / Hyperactivity Disorder)	Prefrontal cortex (executive control), basal ganglia, cerebellum	Often low dopamine and norepinephrine levels affecting focus, motivation, and reward processing	Difficulty sustaining attention, impulsivity, restlessness, time-management issues	Creativity, high energy, divergent thinking, hyperfocus on areas of interest, adaptability
ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder)	Differences in connectivity across the social brain network (amygdala, prefrontal cortex, temporal lobe)	Atypical serotonin and oxytocin regulation; variable dopamine function	Social communication differences, sensory sensitivities, preference for routine	Attention to detail, strong pattern recognition, honesty, deep focus, analytical thinking
Dyslexia	Left hemisphere language network (Broca's and Wernicke's areas, occipito-temporal cortex)	Typical dopamine levels; differences in phonological processing pathways	Reading and spelling challenges, slower decoding of written words	Big-picture thinking, verbal reasoning, creativity, strong problem-solving, storytelling ability
Dyspraxia (Developmental Coordination Disorder)	Cerebellum, parietal lobes, motor planning networks	Neurotransmitters usually normal; issues relate to motor-planning circuits	Coordination and movement difficulties, handwriting challenges, slower processing of motor sequences	Perseverance, empathy, strategic thinking, creativity, strong verbal or cognitive skills
Dyscalculia	Parietal lobes (especially intraparietal sulcus), prefrontal cortex	Neurochemical balance usually typical; differences in numerical processing circuits	Difficulty understanding numbers, sequencing, and spatial reasoning	Strong visual or verbal skills, creativity, intuitive problem-solving, people-oriented strengths

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