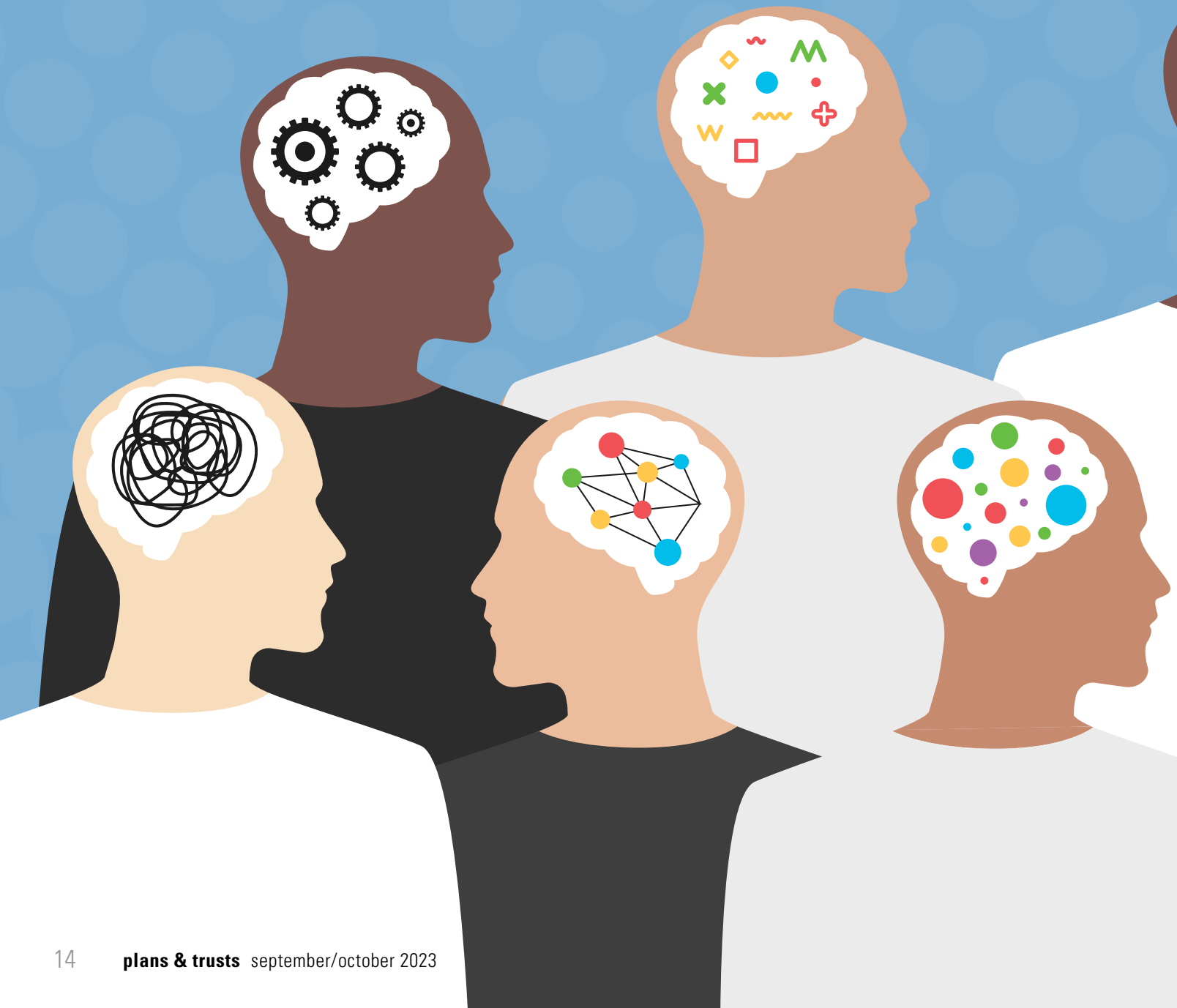


Amidst skill shortages across many industries, employers face a demographic shift with an increased number of neurodiverse candidates entering the workforce. The author explores how organizations can build a “neuro-equal” workplace to support the drive and innovation of employees with cognitive differences.

Working Toward Neuro



diversity Inclusion

by | **Wanda Deschamps**



Ralph Waldo Emerson famously said, "To be yourself in a world that is constantly trying to make you something else is the greatest accomplishment." When you are neurodivergent, often it feels like the world is trying to make you into something else. I am passionate about neurodiversity due to my own professional experiences. As a result of my undiagnosed autism, I was in the workplace for nearly 25 years without understanding why I regularly felt different. Outwardly, I was successful; internally, I was highly anxious and filled with self-doubt. I found communicating challenging and had to work hard to establish connections with some colleagues. I preferred strategy-focused talks, hated office gossip, and became irate when fundamental concepts and ideas were disregarded or misinterpreted. However, there's now a movement afoot that recognizes the importance of accepting individuals and the unique aspects of their identity, including neurodivergence.

What Is Neurodiversity?

In the 1990s, Australian sociologist Judy Singer coined the term *neurodiversity* to describe variations of cognitive function in people and the vast spectrum of characteristics and traits. Some well-known forms of neurodivergence are dyslexia, autism, and attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Other less prominent examples include dyspraxia and dyscalculia. Neurodivergence primarily manifests as differences in social communication and interpersonal relations compared to the neurotypical population, which appreciates that every individual is unique.

Not everyone considers neurodiversity a form of disability. However, I do. In doing so, I come from a "strengths-based approach," meaning that disability, including neurodiversity, is a natural form of human variance—not a deficit—and that the barriers to our full and social and economic inclusion are largely based on societal exclusion stemming from lack of awareness, understanding and acceptance of our differences from the mainstream population.¹ So there is a moral imperative in understanding and accepting neurodiversity. There are also practical reasons starting with the sheer numbers. Approximately one in five people are neurodivergent, translating to roughly 15-20% of the world's population.² Underdiagnosis persists, suggesting that this 15-20% statistic is likely much higher.³ Yet the majority of the neurodiverse population remains either unemployed or underemployed, mirroring the situation for the disability population as a whole.

Why Are Neurodiverse People Unemployed or Underemployed?

Stigma, bias, lack of awareness, outdated hiring and retention practices, and ableism are some of the reasons the majority of the neurodiverse population is either unemployed or underemployed.⁴⁻⁶ The employment barriers that neurodivergent individuals experience can begin with the first time they see a job posting and progress through the application and interview process. Even when neurodivergent individuals secure employment, they can feel unsupported at work for reasons unrelated to their skills and talents, which leaves them unable to perform at their professional best and also excludes and isolates them in the workplace. This creates a huge burden on the individual as meaningful work is a social determinant of health and a key component of overall health and well-being. Barriers to successful employment also lead to a loss for society as it means that our talent and skills are largely untapped or overlooked.⁷

Why Hire Neurodiverse People?

At the same time, neurodivergent individuals possess unique strengths, not in spite of, but because of our varied brain makeups. To this end, there is more research unearthing that even though we are still largely a hidden talent pool, we are a strong one. Dr. Rob Austin, a professor and researcher at the Ivey School of Business at Western University, outlines in a *Harvard Business Review* article that neurodiversity can be a competitive advantage. He and co-author Gary Pisano, a professor of business administration at Harvard University, share that our neurodivergent minds "can bestow special skills in pattern recognition, memory, or mathematics."⁸ We can often identify innovative approaches and solutions because we process information differently.

Organizations that continue to base their judgments and formulation of solutions only on neurotypical cognitive patterns will produce the same results and stagnate. As neurodiversity influences all disciplines, recruiting initiatives in technology are gaining more and more attention; however, neurodiversity is as crucial to academia, the arts, life sciences and the law as it is to technology.

And due to greater diagnosis and disclosure, there is an increased likelihood that you already have collaborated—or will one day collaborate—with neurodivergent colleagues.

Adaptive Practices

As neurodiversity becomes an increasingly important component within a workforce, how do employers accommodate a population with neurological differences?⁹

First and foremost, organizations can commit to the principles of inclusive employment by providing equal opportunities and resources for individuals who may otherwise be excluded. This can be achieved through initiatives such as establishing neurodiverse employee resource groups and peer support networks.

Secondly, it is essential to embed neurodiversity within any Inclusion-Diversity-Equity-Accessibility (IDEA) strategy or program. As a subset of this approach, it is crucial to develop a neurodiverse action plan that encompasses actionable, adaptable and measurable activities based on neurodiverse-aware approaches and that encourages normalizing the conversation about neurodiversity. A good starting point is to focus on recruitment practices. Job postings can explicitly welcome applications from neurodiverse individuals, and the language used in job descriptions is best when clear and straightforward, including only relevant qualifications and experience necessary for the job.

Furthermore, organizations can consider moving away from traditional application practices. Resumes, for instance, may not accurately represent the skills and capabilities of neurodivergent applicants, particularly those with non-linear career paths or employment gaps. Alternative options, such as allowing applicants to submit video applications or providing the opportunity to discuss their application over the phone, can level the playing field.

Interview processes can also be reimagined to account for neurodiversity. Instead of relying solely on behavioral and open-ended questions, organizations can take the following steps.

- Share interview questions with all applicants in advance.
- Encourage candidates to share their relevant interests, even if not explicitly asked for in the job posting.
- Assign practical work tasks that allow applicants to demonstrate their skills and knowledge.
- Structure open-ended questions as multiple-choice prompts to provide clearer guidelines for responses.

Ultimately, it is important to focus on assessing competence, steering away from stereotypes and aligning expectations regarding the organization's mission when evaluating candidates.

Takeaways

- Australian sociologist Judy Singer coined the term *neurodiversity* to describe variations of cognitive function in people and the vast spectrum of characteristics and traits.
- Many organizations are changing the emphasis from placing all the responsibility for integrating into the workplace on the neurodivergent individual to a shared responsibility, including with colleagues, so that neurodiverse talent can grow and flourish.
- Neurodivergent people can have special skills in pattern recognition, memory or mathematics that can often lead to innovative approaches and solutions because they process information differently.
- Inclusive leaders focus on the contributions everyone can make and recognize that making accommodations for accessibility benefits everyone.

Successful examples of this progressive approach can be found in organizations such as Deloitte and Ernst & Young.

When it comes to retaining neurodiverse employees, organizations are realizing that investing in the removal of existing and ongoing barriers leads to increased loyalty and contribution. This shift involves shared responsibility, including support from supervisors and colleagues, rather than placing the sole burden of integration on the neurodivergent individual. Some effective strategies include:

- Providing clear direction and continuous feedback through open and honest communication
- Asking individuals to restate instructions in their own words to ensure understanding
- Approaching differences in communication styles and interpersonal relationships with curiosity and without judgment
- Addressing misunderstandings before they escalate into conflicts by fostering an environment where everyone is heard and understood fairly.

It's worth noting that accommodations made to support neurodiverse individuals often yield broader benefits for all employees. Flexibility in terms of working hours and locations, access to quiet spaces, breaking down assigned work into manageable segments and utilizing assistive technology like noise-canceling headphones are examples of accommodations that benefit both neurodiverse and neurotypical employees. This recognition underscores the importance of neuroinclusion for overall workplace well-being and inclusivity.

Representation Matters

Another aspect is recognizing that neurodiverse talent belongs at all levels of organizations. From the boardroom to the C-suite to the office cubicle, neurodiverse talent can flourish when our abilities and aptitudes are appreciated and matched with organizational goals and priorities. When neurodivergent individuals hold leadership positions, our distinct perspectives not only contribute to a more inclusive workplace, but also a more innovative one.¹⁰ It is crucial for neurodivergent employees to witness representation in leadership roles, as it increases the likelihood of disclosure and creates a sense of belonging. Leaders like Charlotte Valeur, a Danish former merchant banker, corporate governance expert and former chair of the U.K.'s Institute of Directors, reinforces the idea that we too can achieve such roles. In essence, representation truly matters, and individuals need to see it to be it.

Valeur, a vocal advocate of boardroom diversification, publicly shared her autism and ADHD diagnoses at the age of 50. Championing her lived experience, Valeur declared, “My autism is my strength” as she strives to raise awareness among employers and the wider world in hopes of creating a more “neuro-equal” workplace.¹¹ She urges that inclusion, including neuroinclusion, is so important because we cannot continue to look to the same brains to make decisions and formulate solutions to the same problems we have already had, especially in light of global issues such as climate change. Just one of her achievements is helping launch the Institute of Neurodiversity (ION) in 2021. Headquartered in Switzerland, the Institute aims “to bring together one million neurodivergent people, and our allies, from 100 countries.” Driven to accomplish the United Nations’ sustainable development goals, including the eighth goal (“Decent Work and Economic Growth”), “ION works with many businesses, governments and organisations to promote sustained, inclusive and productive employment and decent work for all neurodivergent people.”

Inclusive neurotypical leaders are also essential for neurodiverse inclusion in the workplace. They promote clear, straightforward communication; build trust; and address misunderstandings. They are curious, focusing on individual identity and interests, and they acknowledge diversity across all aspects of an individual's identity, including neurodivergence. Inclusive leaders focus on the contributions everyone can make and recognize that accommodations for accessibility benefit everyone.

BIO

Wanda Deschamps is the founder and principal of Liberty Co, a consultancy focused on increasing neurodiverse employment with a special emphasis on autism due to her diagnosis at midlife. Her approach is centered on the IDEA (Inclusion-Diversity-Equity-Accessibility) framework and highlights inclusive leadership, employee retention and entrepreneurial thinking. Deschamps is also the catalyst behind the #Women4Women collective premised on women supporting other women. Combining these two goals provides an avenue for her to be an advocate for women with autism, including as an advisor and participant in research into autistic women's experiences in the workplace. Deschamps was recently honoured with the 2023 Life Sciences Ontario Volunteer Award.



This shift toward neurodiverse inclusion can be genuinely transformative for neurodiversity. To have an inclusive, diverse and equitable society, we also need an accessible society. *Accessibility* means every aspect is reachable, enterable and approachable for everyone, including different brain makeups. Traditionally, we have considered accessibility from a disability standpoint, such as removing physical barriers to make institutions, venues, programs and activities reachable, enterable and approachable. However, as is the case with neurodiversity, we need to provoke new thinking about accessibility. One effective approach is consistently applying universal design techniques that promote accessibility by reducing barriers for all by engaging multiple stakeholders from various backgrounds at all stages of project development. Whether it pertains to documents, workspaces, websites or social areas, organizations that prioritize accessibility for a variety of neurodivergent workers—and their styles and interpersonal relations—will experience positive outcomes. By actively seeking input from neurodivergent individuals throughout the design process from inception to completion and beyond, organizations can cultivate distinctiveness for their brand in the

marketplace. According to “2023 Trends: Supporting Neurodiversity in the Workplace” from *Work Design Magazine*, “A work environment that embraces, choice, flexibility and variety can deliver that competitive edge by providing a collaborative hub that supports a broad spectrum of people and perspectives.”¹²

Now, more than ever, is the opportune moment to prioritize neurodiverse inclusion. With the forces of globalization and the widespread adoption of technology driving significant demographic and equity-centered transformations, neurodiversity is gaining increasing prominence in today’s workplace. Employers that not only recognize the tremendous value that neurodivergent workers contribute but also actively advocate for accessible workplaces will foster a more equitable and diverse workforce. Moreover, embracing neurodiversity can lead to greater innovation, as diverse perspectives and talents fuel creativity and problem solving. By seizing this pivotal time to prioritize neurodiverse inclusion, employers can unlock a multitude of benefits and thrive in a rapidly evolving world. 🌐

Endnotes

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