

Neurodiversity in the workplace

By Chris Evans July 2015. Published in ILM “The Edge”



From epilepsy and Tourette syndrome to Autism and Asperger's, there are a variety of neurological conditions that need to be addressed and handled properly in the workplace. Chris Evans talks to several psychologists, diversity experts and business leaders who are tackling the conditions head on.

Most businesses are aware of the importance of a diverse workforce, bringing together people of different races, genders, ethnicities and religions. But what about the different ways each of us learn and process information, or communicate? These are vital factors when dealing with people who have neurological differences, including dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and autism.

Autism in the workplace

So often there have been stigmas, barriers and stereotypes attached to those with these conditions, particularly autistic people, which has restricted their ability to find work – only 15% of people with autism are in full-time employment – or flourish in a role. The common assumptions are that they will struggle to integrate into a ‘neuro-typical’ work environment, that communication with colleagues and clients will cause serious problems, and that autistic people can only perform roles that require repetition and working with small details and systems, such as data analysts and software specialists. But this is simply not the case.

“I’ve worked with and spoken to people on the autism spectrum in a variety of departments and roles, including social media experts and finance. They can do any job that matches their skills, just like anyone else. It is wrong to pigeonhole them into technical roles,” says Emily Swiatek, Employment Training Consultant at the National Autistic Society.

Fortunately, there are signs across the business world that things are changing. A CIPD conference a few years ago was all about why companies should hire autistic people, and now they’re addressing how companies can go about recruiting those with autism.

“Managers need to stop being scared of hiring autistic people, and instead focus on what positives they can bring to a role, and identify/work out how best to overcome any potential challenges. It’s worth getting the feet wet and learning as you go. You’re not going to have all the answers, but often autistic people produce some wonderful surprises in what they can achieve,” stresses Dianah Worman, Diversity Adviser at the CIPD.

Indeed, more and more companies are proactively recruiting autistic people based on their skillsets and the benefits they can bring to an organisation. One of the major players on this front is the global IT software company SAP.

“We introduced an Autism at Work programme a couple of years ago with the objective to have 1% of our global workforce represented by people with autism by 2020,” explains Jose Velasco, who heads up the programme for SAP. “Working with partners around the world, we go through a thorough recruitment process to identify candidates’ skills, social issues that need addressing, and give them sessions with the managers of the relevant departments (where they make presentations), so that they can get to know each other. The managers are blown away by these sessions.”

Already SAP has 55 autistic employees based in the US alone, covering a variety of different roles, including communications, graphic design and IT project management. So far, the programme has been a great success, and SAP are being approached by several other companies to adopt similar programmes.

“We’re currently piloting an autism at work programme, using SAP as our model,” says Fleur Bothwick, director of diversity and inclusiveness at Ernst & Young. “We also have a stammering network, and groups focusing on dyslexia and mental health issues.

“The important thing is for managers and employees to receive education, or do their own research, about the different conditions, what behavioural traits to look out for, how to provide support, and most importantly openly communicate with those affected about what they like and need.”

There can be issues like what hours suit them; whether there are particular situations where they don’t feel comfortable; any changes to their roles; when and how they want to discuss their performance review etc. This, in turn, reduces any anxieties for both parties (the manager and the employee). The autism spectrum is, of course, extremely varied, which is why it is so important to identify the strengths and challenges of each individual, particularly any communication issues. Bringing in outside help can be beneficial.

“We provide one-to-one sessions with autistic people, including those with mild forms of autism, known as STEMs (Scientists, Technologists, Engineers and Mathematicians), often to address any social communication issues they’re having with colleagues,” explains Emma Seward, a consultant business psychologist. “Normally, when we’re coaching we won’t tell people what to do, but with STEMs we often need to explain simple things like greeting your work mates when you come into the office. We also talk with their colleagues so that they understand that the person isn’t being rude, they just process information and communicate differently, and can find it hard to empathise.”

There can be an obsession in business with social and emotional competence, asserts Sally Moore, Director at Top Stream Coaching. You only have to look at some of the job adverts specifying the need for “good interpersonal skills”, and “team players”. But actually if you “reduce social expectations and accommodate differences in approaches, companies find that they can get the best out of their autistic employees, managing challenges and avoiding vulnerabilities.”

Appreciating and valuing a different world view can only be a good thing is the unanimous view of all the experts questioned for this piece. *“Sometimes adjustments might need to be made in terms of clearer communication and strategies. For example, some autistic people don’t like ambiguous information, such as ‘I’ll get back to you later’, but not specifying a time, or changing meeting times at the last minute. But actually clarity on these issues can benefit all employees,”* argues Steve Williams, Head of Equality at Acas.

The overall feeling is that hiring more people with neurological conditions is a positive thing, and creating a culture of awareness and understanding in the workplace to allow them to flourish can only help alleviate any fears, remove stigmas and avoid confrontations based on misunderstandings.