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Neurodiversity in the workplace

The importance of understanding and accommodating neurodiversities

Summary

Although neurodiversity is relatively common (1 in 7 people in the UK), workplaces are rarely designed with neurodiversity in mind. Neurodivergent people report additional challenges with securing and maintaining a job because the workplace environment, policies, and culture are not inclusive.

In our research we have been working with neurodivergent people and line managers to identify the specific barriers that are experienced at work, and to understand the challenges associated with providing effective support. Neurodivergent people reported systemic barriers which made the workplace more difficult to navigate. They also reported needing to work harder to manage the social demands of their job.

Line managers reported a lack of education and confidence in knowing how to support neurodivergent colleagues. Overall, our work has highlighted that a culture change is needed. With this in mind, we have developed a consultancy program to work with organisations to help them to identify specific areas where inclusivity can be improved and provide tailored, practical support for implementation.

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Neurodiversity

Around 1 in 7 people in the UK are neurodivergent. Neurodiversity is characterised by a unique way of thinking and experiencing the world. Often this means neurodivergent people have a different profile of strengths and difficulties that they bring to the workplace.

For example, neurodivergent people may experience heightened sensory processing which can lead to good attention to detail, but increased risk of sensory overwhelm or burnout. They may think more creatively but may need more support to understand something that seems intuitive to a neurotypical person. Importantly every neurodivergent person is different.

The Problem

Neurodivergent people are under-represented within the workforce [1]. In addition to recruitment issues, this under-representation could reflect poor disclosure rates or a 'leaky pipeline' in which neurodivergent individuals are struggling to thrive and progress at work [2].

This may be indicative of a non-inclusive workplace culture where there is a lack of support for, and acceptance of neurodiversity. An important problem is that current support systems rely on individuals disclosing their neurodiversity to initiate the process of receiving reasonable adjustments [2].

In addition, reasonable adjustment processes may be opaque and difficult to navigate (for the employee and employer). Many neurodivergent people fear stigma and judgement and may choose to forgo additional support in order to avoid disclosure [3].

Recommendations

- Organisations should proactively seek to **identify and mitigate the barriers that neurodivergent people encounter** at all stages of their organisational practice (recruitment, workplace support, career progression). This will **reduce the burden of disclosure** on neurodivergent individuals and **make the workplace more accessible to everyone.**

- Organisations should **co-produce changes with neurodivergent people** to ensure that they are appropriate and targeted.

Our Research

Through a series of focus groups with neurodivergent people and line managers, we identified common barriers that neurodivergent people experience in the workplace, as well as the challenges that line managers face when supporting neurodivergent employees.

We also worked closely with an organisation to identify specific areas where inclusivity in their recruitment practices, physical office spaces, and workplace culture could be improved. We co-produced recommendations for change with neurodivergent people.

Quote

"I think it's really important that all the neurodivergent voices are heard because they've got so many different opinions ... with [this] research it's really good for getting their voices across."

- Neurodivergent person

Our Findings

Neurodivergent people face barriers in the workplace which mean they need to put in more effort than neurotypical people to succeed at work. Specifically, neurodivergent people reported that the unwritten social demands of a job are often more challenging than the job itself. They reported that self-advocacy is an additional burden that leaves them vulnerable to stigma and incurs a personal cost to their mental health. A supportive line manager can make all the difference for job retention [4].

Line managers often do not know how to best support neurodivergent colleagues. While keen to find solutions, structural boundaries within the organisation constrain what line managers can do.

Implications

We need a culture change. Workplaces need to be visibly open and accepting of neurodiversity, and we need to be proactive in considering the needs of neurodivergent people.

General guidance and training about neurodiversity is not enough. Organisations need more tailored, practical support to proactively review their workplace practices.

Embedding neurodivergent perspectives in this process is essential if we want to make the workplace fully inclusive.

Call to Action

"Make the workplace **easier to navigate** ... I think it's really **important to listen to neurodivergent voices** and try and change the workplace policies ... I believe it'll make [the workplace] a nicer and friendlier place."

- Neurodivergent person

Further Support

We have developed an evidence-based consultancy program where we work with organisations to identify key areas of inclusive practice that can be improved.

We adopt a participatory approach where we include neurodivergent consultants who provide tailored, practical feedback on how to improve specific policies and practices.

Changing these practices to be more inclusive for everybody should reduce the need for people to disclose their neurodiversity to access support. It will also create a more open and accepting culture for all employees. Please get in contact with lauren.marsh@nottingham.ac.uk for more information about our consultancy program.

References

[1] Office for National Statistics (2021) Disability and Employment Dataset.

[2] Buckland Review (2024) The Buckland Review of Autism Employment: report and recommendations. Department for Work and Pensions. Accessed at: https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-work-pensions/about/research#research-and-analysis-publications

[3] McDowall, A., Doyle, N., & Kiseleva, M. (2023). Neurodiversity at work: Demand, supply and a gap analysis.

[4] Phillips, Ropar & Marsh (in prep) The challenges of supporting neurodiversity in the workplace: experiences of neurodivergent workers and line-managers.