Developing and Expanding Neurodiversity in the Nonprofit Workplace

A Summary of Evidence Supporting Neurodiversity in the Workplace

Antoinette “Toni” Radcliffe
Goodwin College of Professional Studies, Drexel University
NPM 700: Capstone I, Spring 2023
Dr. Albert Vario
September 9, 2023

Report created in collaboration with Mary Kate Henry and Neurodiversity Employment Network: Philadelphia
The Neurodiversity Movement

**Overview**
In recent years, there has been a shift in the way that neurodiversity and neurotypicality are perceived. Whereas before individuals tended to be classified as either normal (neurotypical) or neurodivergent, now people are starting to see neurodiversity and neurotypicality as equally normal and/or accepted.

**Figure 1 | The Neurodiversity Movement**

- **Medical Model of Disability**
  - Normal (Neurotypical)
  - Neurodivergent

- **Neurodiversity Paradigm**
  - Neurotypical
  - Neurodivergent

**Note:** This figure depicts the shift away from the previous model of disability to the neurodiversity model where both neurodiverse and neurotypical functioning are seen as normal.

**Neurodiversity as a Paradigm**
The neurodiversity paradigm was designed as a way to shift public thinking away from the perception of neurodiversity as a disorder towards seeing neurodiversity as a natural part of human variation and the unique strengths that come with it (Bruyère & Colella, 2022, p. 14). Under the neurodiversity paradigm, both neurotypical and neurodivergent functioning are seen as normal (Honeybourne, 2019, p. 20).

**Neurodivergence in the United States**

**Overview**
Research has indicated that neurodivergence is a spectrum encompassing a number of different disorders; it is estimated that roughly one in four Americans exist somewhere on this spectrum. Additional research shows that individuals on this spectrum often face issues with both finding employment and remaining employed despite the benefits that come from employing neurodiverse individuals.

**Prevalence of Neurodivergence**
Over the last few decades, the percentage of Americans who identify as neurodivergent has experienced significant growth (Bruyère & Colella, 2022); autism spectrum disorder being one of the most common forms of neurodivergence in the United States (Maenner et al., 2023). Currently, it is estimated that over 25% of the American population is neurodivergent.

**Neurodivergent Employment Trends**

- **Unemployment:** In 2023, roughly four in five neurodivergent individuals report being unemployed despite having a strong desire to work, a relatively high number even compared to other groups of individuals with disabilities (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Bruyère & Colella, 2022).

  **Roughly four in five neurodivergent individuals report being unemployed despite having a strong desire to work.**

- **Around one out of every four Americans exists somewhere on the neurodivergent spectrum.**
Benefits of Neurodiversity in the Workplace

Overview
Research has indicated that neurodiversity is a spectrum encompassing a number of different disorders; it is estimated that roughly one in four Americans exist somewhere on this spectrum. Additional research shows that individuals on this spectrum often face issues with both finding employment and remaining employed despite the benefits that come from employing neurodiverse individuals.

Figure 2 | Benefits of Neurodiversity at Work

Efficacy & Efficiency
- Profitability and Value Creation
- Productivity
- Employee Engagement

Cultivation of Strengths
- Creativity
- Innovation
- Specialized Skills

Social Benefits
- Representation
- Reputation
- Improved Wellbeing

Efficacy and Efficiency

Profitability and Value Creation: Research has found that companies that place more of an emphasis on disability inclusion have tend to be more profitable than companies that don’t (Accenture et al., 2018). This has been largely attributed to the fact that hiring more neurodiverse individuals often results in new perspectives being brought to the table, which leads to greater innovation and a more positive public image among others (Honeybourne, 2019, p. 26).

Productivity: A 2022 survey found that autistic individuals who were currently employed felt that they were more efficient employees than their neurotypical colleagues; they attributed this having higher levels of productivity, higher levels of accuracy, and strong organizational skills (Cope & Remington, 2022). These findings are supported by research showing that neuroinclusivity levels and productivity are positively correlated (Khan et al., 2022).

Employee Engagement: On average, neurodivergent employees tend to show higher levels of organizational loyalty than neurotypical ones (Bewley & George, 2016). Expanding on this point, companies that have a greater focus on neuroinclusion are more likely to have higher retention rates than companies that don’t (Khan et al., 2022).
Cultivation of Strengths

**Creativity:** When asked, autistic individuals report having higher levels of creativity and innovation compared to their neurotypical colleagues (Cope & Remington, 2022). Neurodivergent employees often bring different perspectives to issues, which often results in greater levels of innovation, particularly in creative and digital industries (Haque and Gilroy, 2016; Honeybourne, 2019).

**Innovation:** It has been reported that individuals with disabilities tend to have higher problem-solving abilities, which in turn leads them to be more innovative (Accenture et al., 2018; Thompson, 2023; Austin & Pisano, 2017). In large organizations with a greater focus on neuroinclusion, this not only results in more innovative products and ideas, but also in more inclusive products and services (Accenture et al., 2018; Austin & Pisano, 2017).

**Specialized Skills:** A 2022 study found that autistic individuals possess many skills that prove advantageous in the workplace, such as higher levels of memory retention, attention to detail, and pattern recognition among others. This same study also found that autistic individuals tend to be more empathetic and have a stronger sense of social justice and fairness compared to neurotypical individuals (Cope & Remington, 2022). On top of that, it has also been projected that neurodivergent individuals will have an advantage in the workplace as the skills autistic individuals tend to struggle with become less important while the skills they excel at become more important (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023, p. 5).

Social Benefits

**Representation:** Research has found that organizations with more neurodiverse workforces will appeal to more consumers than ones that don’t (Accenture et al., 2018; Ortiz, 2020). Since consumer groups tend to be neurodiverse, they will be more likely to prefer organizations that reflect this diversity (Honeybourne, 2019).

**Reputation:** On average, organizations with higher neurodiversity levels have higher levels of customer engagement and trust than ones who don’t (Krzeminska et al., 2019; Honeybourne, 2019). In addition, employees tend to have a more positive view of these organizations compared to other organizations (Grenawalt et al., 2020).

**Figure 3 | Influence of Disability Awareness on Organizational Reputation**

- **66%** The percentage of consumers who purchase from organizations featuring disability awareness in advertising
- **78%** The percentage of consumers who purchase from organizations whose physical locations are disability accessible

**Note:** These two figures show the percentage of consumers who are more likely to utilize organizations with a focus on inclusion

**Wellbeing for All:** Organizations with a greater emphasis on fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment tend to have more productive and satisfied employees - both neurotypical and neurodivergent - as a result (Khan et al., 2022). In addition, it also leads to better organizational processes that benefit everyone involved (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Honeybourne, 2019; Houdek, 2022), McDowall et al., 2023).
References


