



NEURODIVERSITY at WORK 2021

SUMMARY REPORT

The pandemic brought both opportunities and challenges for neurodiverse people, according to podcast host and author Theo Smith, who chaired the d&i Leaders Neurodiversity at Work Online Seminar 2021.



THEO SMITH

“Technology became our friend because one day we were at work, the next day we could be at home. But it also plays a negative part in our lives, sometimes throwing candidate ‘pearls and diamonds’ away because its algorithm has been programmed to look for gold,” he explained.

According to the Office for National Statistics, only one in five autistic people in the UK are in employment, yet a fraction of companies include neurodiversity in their D&I activities. Smith called upon organisations to “flip the narrative”, shining a light on how giving neurodiverse people a platform to succeed can empower them to be their best selves.

Over the course of the seminar, a series of practical sessions and discussions reflected on how this could be done.

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FIVE WAYS TO MAKE YOUR ORGANISATION

NEURODIVERSITY SMART



AIDAN HEALY

Many organisations overlook neurodiversity when they discuss disability, despite the fact that neurodiverse employees have much to offer in terms of innovation,

according to Aidan Healy, chief executive officer of neurodiversity consultancy Lexxic. However, a gradual approach can ensure that your organisation is not missing out on talent and that its processes are as neurodiversity-inclusive as possible. Healy suggested the following five-step approach.

1. Look at your adjustments process

“Often we hear about poor experiences of the workplace adjustment process,” said Healy. “The relationship between the individual and their manager might have broken down, they might have had to take time off while they wait for an adjustment.” This doesn’t just impact that employee’s view of their manager, but of the whole organisation, particularly if they have built up courage to share a diagnosis. “Not having a clear process means organisations can fall down,” he added.

2. Attitudes can be barriers

A recent survey from the Institute of Leadership and Management found that 50% of managers would be uncomfortable employing someone with neurodifference. It’s one thing to remove barriers from day-to-day working life, but line managers’ attitudes can also be a barrier to someone’s chances of promotion or ability to be effective at work. “No matter how good the processes, your line managers are the custodians of inclusion. Without them bought in, there can be big gaps,” said Healy.

3. Review recruitment and talent attraction processes

“Employers sometimes say they have a gold standard adjustment process but struggle to attract neurodiverse candidates,” he added. “Traditional recruitment processes become barriers to those people seeing your organisation as neurodiverse-friendly.” This could be something such as a job description requiring someone with ‘excellent communication skills’ or a ‘good team player’. Interviews may favour neurotypical candidates who make eye contact or understand subtle cues, so consider the purpose different parts of the process serve and whether they can be tweaked.

4. How do you communicate?

Think about how welcome neurodiverse candidates feel when they research your organisation. If they Google your company, do you clearly state and communicate that you embrace difference, or does your site use unnecessary business jargon or is not accessible? “When we miscommunicate, it’s not just embarrassing but can be detrimental to your reputation,” advised Healy.

5. Make neurodiversity part of your strategy

According to the CIPD, only about 10% of organisations include neurodiversity in their disability or D&I strategy. “If we want to make change, we need to think about neurodiversity through multiple different lenses,” he added. “We often see that one piece of the puzzle is missing, so there might be a vision statement but no resources, or no executive buy-in. Neurodiversity-smart organisations are clear on how it links to the wider goals of their organisation and embed it in their strategy.”

NO MATTER HOW GOOD THE PROCESSES, YOUR LINE MANAGERS ARE THE CUSTODIANS OF INCLUSION

Aidan Healy, chief executive officer, Lexxic

HOW NETWORK RAIL ADOPTED A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO ADJUSTMENTS



CAROLINE EGLINTON

It has been estimated that around 15% of people are in some way neurodiverse, so it's crucial for a huge employer like Network Rail to consider neurodiversity as part of its inclusion strategy. "Statistically, we estimated that around 7,000 of our 44,000 employees could be neurodiverse," said Caroline Eglinton, access and inclusion manager. "Some will have a diagnosis, some not, some might not even know they are neurodiverse."

With this in mind, the approach the organisation decided to take was to focus on holistic adjustments that would not require someone to share a diagnosis and would also support individuals with multiple conditions. Eglinton herself was diagnosed with ADHD at the age of 39, and also has adjustments at work for her cystic fibrosis, so appreciates the need for accommodations to have a broader focus. "Overlap is the rule rather than the exception with neurodiversity," she added. "Not everyone falls into one diagnosis box and we're all multi-dimensional, with a high likelihood of a secondary diagnosis. People may also have other physical or mental health conditions that impact them that are not related to their neurodiversity, such as being menopausal."

Network Rail has drawn on the neurodiversity toolkit from the Business Disability Forum to support its employees, and a key element of this is the Reasonable Adjustments passport. "This is useful because it belongs to the employee and they have autonomy over what it contains," explained Eglinton. Another approach is to consider common barriers that affect neurodiverse employees rather than trying to box people into a single condition. "It could be something like difficulty with social interaction, time management, movement and coordination," she added. "They don't have to worry if the things that are barriers for them at work are related to a specific diagnosis."

Managers can access the neurodiversity toolkit on the organisation's SharePoint platform, and adjustments are regularly reviewed and updated. This helps both employees and managers feel more confident when discussing their needs. Eglinton offered four key pieces of advice:

- Take a person-centred approach
- Don't limit adjustments to specific conditions
- Focus on the removal of barriers rather than diagnosis and
- Review this together regularly

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Caroline Eglinton, access and inclusion manager, Network Rail

MANAGING NEURODIVERSITY IN THE WORLD OF REMOTE WORK

The sudden switch to remote work in March 2020 proved to be a blessing but also a curse for many. Suddenly many employees were able to choose their hours or see more of their families, but at the same time others faced pressure to be constantly online. Some physical barriers were lifted for people with disabilities, such as the need to commute, but at the same time they may not have had access to the same levels of accessibility support as in the workplace.



MICHAEL VERMEERSCH

“For neurodiverse people they were often faced with different sensory stimuli, and neuro minorities had to cope with a neuro majority that was also behaving differently,”

said Michael Vermeersch, Digital Inclusion Lead & Chair of the UK Disability ERG at Microsoft. Tools such as Teams have helped workers stay connected and managers to conduct regular check-ins, but it is also crucial to use some of the other features of these platforms to ensure boundaries stay in place.

“Analytics can tell managers when workload is going over a certain level or someone is spending a lot of time on video calls,” he added. “They can reduce workload or tell managers if someone in the team needs a break. This shows employees that they work in a culture that cares about their wellbeing.” Technology also supports neurodiverse employees to have options in how they communicate, such as turning off video or turning on accessibility functions such as captioning.

With calls for employees to return to offices and organisations finalising plans for hybrid working, being mindful of how this might impact neurodiverse

employees will be essential. Atif Choudhury, founder of Diversity and Ability, said it was important to take positive lessons from the pandemic: “2020 has shown we can make those adjustments overnight. Now we must learn from that, not go back to 2019, and be excited about what we have learned,” he said.



ATIF CHOUDHURY

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Michael Vermeersch, digital inclusion lead & chair of the UK disability ERG, Microsoft

EQUALITY LAW AND THE STARBUCKS CASE

HR and diversity teams should be aware of their legal obligations to protect employees from discrimination because of a particular protected characteristic. With disability, they have additional obligations: to ensure reasonable adjustments are in place so an individual is not at a disadvantage, and to ensure discrimination does not occur arising from someone's disability.

In 2016, a Starbucks employee won an important case against the coffee chain after she was dismissed for allegedly falsifying documents and making mistakes with food hygiene records. Meseret Kumulchew worked as a supervisor at a Starbucks branch in south London, where she was required to enter a record of refrigerator and water temperatures at specific times on a duty roster.

However, her dyslexia meant that she struggled with reading and writing the temperatures and made mistakes. Her employer accused her of falsifying the health and safety record book and she was forced to undergo a disciplinary process, despite her having made it known she was dyslexic. She was given lesser duties and told to retrain, but her treatment by the company left her feeling suicidal, and she filed a claim.

The tribunal found that Starbucks had failed to make reasonable adjustments and that Kumulchew had been subject to discrimination arising from her disability. Jenna Ide, a senior employment associate at Thomas Mansfield Solicitors, represented the claimant. She told d&I Leaders seminar delegates: "As part of the case,

Starbucks disputed that her dyslexia constituted a disability under the Equality Act. This definition covers physical or mental impairments that have a 'substantial adverse effect' on someone's day-to-day activities and are long term, so should cover neuro differences but this is not automatic."



JENNA IDE

A key learning from this case for organisations is that no knowledge of her disability was required for her claim of indirect discrimination, so it's important to check that policies are not indirectly discriminatory. Additionally, Starbucks could have removed barriers such as the small size of fonts on health and safety records, difficult-to-read handwritten documents and providing their employee with discussion minutes for her disciplinary meeting at the last minute. "The claim arose not because of her disability but the actions taken because of the mistakes she made, due to her dyslexia," added Ide.

Finally, the tribunal took into consideration whether Starbucks had in place a policy on supporting neurodiverse people or diversity awareness training for staff - it did not, leaving the judge to conclude that "witnesses displayed a surprising lack of knowledge and understanding about equality issues". Ensuring such policies and training are in place are a crucial first step in avoiding potential claims, advised Ide.

AS PART OF THE CASE, STARBUCKS DISPUTED THAT HER DYSLEXIA CONSTITUTED A DISABILITY UNDER THE EQUALITY ACT. THIS DEFINITION COVERS PHYSICAL OR MENTAL IMPAIRMENTS THAT HAVE A 'SUBSTANTIAL ADVERSE EFFECT' ON SOMEONE'S DAY-TO-DAY ACTIVITIES AND ARE LONG TERM, SO SHOULD COVER NEURO DIFFERENCES BUT THIS IS NOT AUTOMATIC.

Jenna Ide, senior employment associate, Thomas Mansfield Solicitors

HOW P&G ATTRACTS, RECRUITS AND RETAINS

NEURODIVERSE TALENT



DR EMMA-JANE O'LEARY

Dr Emma-Jane O'Leary, a director in P&G's research and development division, has a personal reason for leading her company on a journey towards more

neurodiverse inclusive talent practices. Her own son was diagnosed with autism at the age of six, and she identified that businesses could benefit from the positives neurodiverse candidates can offer. The company's neurodiversity programme, which started in 2017, has now been rolled out to a number of global locations to great success.

There are three key elements to how P&G attracts neurodiverse talent: an array of recruitment approaches linking candidates to the right roles; fostering an inclusive environment for 'unmasking' (where individuals share a diagnosis or barriers they face); and providing an intentional and clear career progression strategy. For R&D roles, the focus is on someone's technical skills rather than their educational background. "We want to pick up people who have a passion, even if they have learnt that online or through practical experience," said O'Leary. "It's about matching

people's strengths to our approach and ensuring there's an equitable process."

Practical steps such as ensuring non-verbal candidates can demonstrate their skills through a hands-on approach and including colleagues with autism in training so people can ask questions help to create an inclusive environment. There is a global support network for neurodiverse employees and trained mentors who work with managers and individuals to help them understand neuro differences. A sensory deprivation space provides downtime for anyone who feels overwhelmed and managers are coached on how they support neurodiverse colleagues in small ways such as setting clear expectations or turning up to meetings on time.

In terms of career development, P&G is careful to recognise that some neurodiverse people can exhibit what is known as a "spiky profile", where they excel at one thing but are less competent at another. "We have well-defined work plans with clear expectations and metrics, with career progression plans matched to these individual strengths," added O'Leary. In addition, there is a reasonable adjustment passport an employee can use to open discussions with their manager about how they can be supported.

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Dr Emma-Jane O'Leary, director and neurodiversity lead, P&G

TAKING AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH TO NEURODIVERSITY

Not only are overlapping diagnoses of neurodiversity the norm rather than the exception, but it's crucial that organisations do not only see their employees through only this lens. Anything from someone's ethnicity to social economic background can affect how their neurodiversity impacts their work or even their access to diagnosis and support.

Atif Choudhury, founder of social enterprise Diversity and Ability, explained: "Neurodiversity is an umbrella term, there are different 'labels' underneath it from tourette's to dyslexia. These labels give something a name but don't tell us about the individual or the impact on them. We know nothing about their sense of safety or difficulties they may have faced in education or the workforce." An example includes a common assumption that autism affects white, male, middle class individuals, who may have been more financially able to seek diagnosis.

Choudhury recommends organisations provide an "anticipatory welcome" rather than pinning adjustments to specific diagnoses or groups. "We have an opportunity to reshape our thinking as to who is part of conversations around neurodiversity and who is not," he added. "Someone may face barriers due to their cultural heritage and when you have to do more in the workplace, you learn to share less."

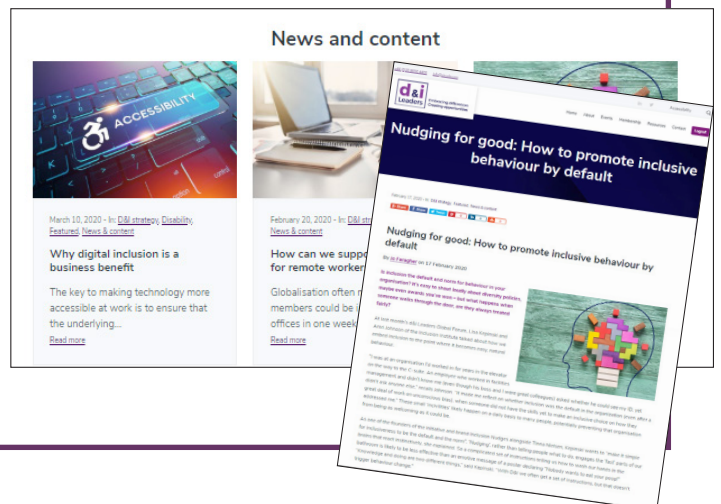
At P&G, the focus is on "unmasking" neurodiversity rather than disclosure and diagnosis, which by its nature is more inclusive. Dr Emma O'Leary said: "Unmasking is about having a culture that celebrates all aspects of diversity, as the more we can open conversations, the more people can be their authentic selves." Sarah Brooks-Pearce, future talent manager at Auto Trader UK, added that offering a menu of adjustments supports a more intersectional approach. She said: "Giving people the option to pick the adjustments they need without having to share is crucial."

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Atif Choudhury, founder, Diversity and Ability



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THE ROLE OF STORYTELLING IN SUPPORTING NEURODIVERSE EMPLOYEES



SARAH BROOKS-PEARCE

“Hearing a person’s story allows people to hear someone’s authentic experience, but you need a culture of trust in the first place,” said Sarah Brooks-Pearce, Future

Talent Manager and Disability & Neurodiversity Network Lead at Auto Trader UK. Her experience of bringing up a neurodiverse child and later dealing with her own neurodiversity diagnosis has been made much easier through story sharing and knowing that others have similar experiences.

“My son was diagnosed with the genetic condition Neurofibromatosis type 1 aged four, and this means he was likely to have other neurodiverse conditions. Soon after he received a diagnosis of ADHD and this made me reconsider my own stereotypes of people who are neurodiverse,” she told the seminar. “Some years later, my career was progressing but I was feeling challenged - there were days when my output was incredible and others where I’d lose time. I was also doing things differently to others and avoided sending important emails.”

Brooks-Pearce sought help from her GP and was diagnosed with obsessive compulsive disorder, and later dyslexia and dyspraxia. After recommendations to seek an assessment for ADHD, this was a further diagnosis. At Auto Trader UK, stories just like this have become the bedrock of its support for neurodiverse

employees. There is a disability and neurodiversity network and Auto Trader UK was the first autism-friendly employer. “I’ve been overwhelmed by stories I’ve heard since; having someone else share their experience has been eye-opening. Some have explored help, others have just appreciated a chat.”

The company now works with charities such as Leonard Cheshire and recently carried out an audit of its reasonable adjustments, which showed they were helping neurotypical employees just as much as those with autism. Sharing of data on neurodiversity in recruitment and assessment processes has increased, and she believes this is because employees have been comfortable sharing their stories externally. “This conversation will continue to grow, and by the time my son applies for his first job, I hope any misunderstandings around neurodiversity have gone,” she added.

Caroline Eglinton, access and inclusion manager at Network Rail, was diagnosed with ADHD at 39. She argued that openness around neurodiversity can help neurotypical employees understand more about how certain conditions manifest. “Because I was doing well at work but not in other areas people would ask why I sought a diagnosis,” she said. “But they don’t see the struggle behind the scenes to keep on going at work. Some people don’t want to seek diagnosis or share because they’re worried about feeling shame or feeling different. But it’s important to reassure people how common this is and that it doesn’t change you.”

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Sarah Brooks-Pearce, future talent manager, Auto Trader UK

HOW EMPLOYEE NETWORKS CAN BUILD UNDERSTANDING AND AWARENESS



MARK RAINBOW

When Openreach wanted to expand its support for neurodiverse employees and be more inclusive in its attraction processes, setting up and

growing a network played a crucial role. “We originally set up our neurodiversity network because we’d recruited more than 9,000 people in just four years, including many who had disclosed that they were neurodiverse. Then we looked at the wider organisation and estimated this could be around 5,000 of our total workforce,” explained Mark Rainbow, senior HR and L&D manager at Openreach.

“We wanted to implement processes from the point of attraction right through the employee lifecycle, with support mechanisms built around the individual based on what they’re willing to share,” he added. The network is a visible reminder of the company’s inclusive approach to neurodiversity - around 60% of the committee is neurodiverse and share a broad range of conditions and experiences.

Openreach formally launched its network during neurodiversity week in March using the Workplace from Facebook communications platform. The CEO recorded a video to show his support and

in just a week membership went up from 100 to around 750. The network is structured so there is a committee driving the top-level strategy, with champions around the business and the members of the network itself. It has committed to several goals over the next year, including raising awareness, improving accessibility, linking up with schools and colleges and celebrating success.

“This is not about going for awards, but demonstrating internally that people can bring their whole selves to work. My own daughter is neurodivergent and I wonder how she will transition into the world of employment once she leaves her support plan,” he concluded.

Giles Barker, diversity and inclusion lead at parent company BT, added that the network had worked with the corporate D&I team to align their activities to



GILES BARKER

the wider business strategy. His advice to organisations thinking about starting their own neurodiversity network was to “start with a drumbeat of communication, then bring together like minded individuals to see how you can educate the business”, and to ensure there is strong support and awareness from the senior management team.

START WITH A DRUMBEAT OF COMMUNICATION, THEN BRING TOGETHER LIKE MINDED INDIVIDUALS TO SEE HOW YOU CAN EDUCATE THE BUSINESS

Giles Barker, diversity and inclusion lead, BT

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