



Invisible Diversity in the Workplace: Capabilities, Challenges, and Strategies

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This paper, *"Invisible Diversity" in the Workplace: Capabilities, Challenges, and Strategies*, is a summary and guide for employers interested in promoting an emerging approach to diversity and transforming the workplace to support all individuals, including neurodiverse people and those with mental health conditions. Neurodiverse individuals – including people with autism, dyslexia, ADHD, and other conditions – and people with mental health conditions constitute a largely untapped pool of “cognitively diverse” talent, capabilities, and perspectives. Employers that recruit, hire, and enable these individuals can achieve important advantages. Yet most organizations continue to overlook this opportunity.

Thankfully, attitudes toward so-called “invisible diversity,” or cognitive diversity, are beginning to change. Some of the most well-known and respected companies in the world, such as Microsoft, J.P. Morgan, EY, and SAP, have launched neurodiversity programs that are already delivering benefits. Other employers have focused on fostering diversity for both mental and physical conditions, including support for those with mental health challenges. Pioneering research on workplace neurodiversity has been published in *Harvard Business Review* and other publications. Such efforts will only become more relevant, as cognitively diverse employees bring individual skills and capabilities, as well as innovative thinking and technical skills that are increasingly important in today’s economy.

Advances in employer understanding of what “diversity” can encompass provides momentum for more employers to launch their own, tailored, solutions. Demographic diversity remains a crucial area of focus and should continue to be a top priority for employers. However, currently the vast majority of organizations have not yet accounted for cognitive diversity and mental health in their workplace processes and policies. As a result, traditional hiring and management practices may include hidden barriers that effectively keep a diverse set of talented or skilled people out of positions or workplaces where they might thrive. However, thoughtful approaches can overcome these barriers and deliver benefits for organizations and employees.

One Mind at Work has developed this paper as a primer, starting point, and resource for companies as they consider “invisible diversity,” as well as workplace mental health more broadly. It provides a summary of the current landscape, an analysis of the unique capabilities and barriers related to cognitively diverse people, case studies of successful programs, and a series of recommendations for effective efforts.

We hope that this paper will spark the conversations that lead employers to recruit, integrate, and support every individual with the potential to be an outstanding team member and employee – achieving important benefits for organizations, individuals, and society overall.

Signed:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Garen K. Staglin". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'S' at the end.

Garen Staglin
Founder
One Mind at Work

Current Landscape

A New Approach to Diversity

New approaches consider how to integrate a broad range of people with differences in how they think, act and are motivated, including neuro-atypical individuals who display variances in brain function and behavioral traits through autism spectrum disorder, dyslexia, ADHD, and other neurodevelopmental conditions. There is growing evidence of the unique capabilities and workforce potential of neurodiversity, particularly in today's innovation-focused economy, but many individuals with neurodevelopmental conditions are unemployed or underemployed.

People with mental health conditions face many similar barriers in the workplace. Though these individuals can succeed with appropriate work strategies, supportive environments and employer backing – and many are already doing so – the majority face stigma, challenging workplace cultures, and limited access to services that support their success. These factors can undermine productivity, disrupt careers, and even lead to unemployment. Mental health conditions have generally been discussed separately from neurodiversity, but both groups face similar challenges and can benefit from an employer focus on the invisible traits of diversity.

Neurodiverse individuals and those with mental health conditions are part of a workforce with cognitive diversity that, with active engagement from employers, can excel in the workforce, providing unique skills and individual capabilities. Employers have the opportunity to reach untapped potential and to realize the related advantages of a workforce that is physically and mentally diverse.



Major employers, business experts, and researchers are recognizing a powerful new source of competitive advantage: “invisible diversity” in the workplace.

Invisible Diversity and Work

Cognitively diverse people may face challenges in unemployment or underemployment, even though they may have individual skills or above-average capabilities in a range of areas.

While many neurodiverse people and people with mental health conditions are college-educated and highly proficient in various fields, traditional hiring processes and workplace arrangements may present significant obstacles that keep them from finding appropriate positions

and succeeding at work. For example, only 16% of people with autism have full-time, paid employment, and 51% of this group say their skills are higher than their job requires.ⁱ Experts estimate that unemployment rate for people receiving public mental health services (7.1 million people in the U.S.) is approximately 80%.ⁱⁱ

However, leading organizations are beginning to engage with cognitively diverse people, recognizing that this type of diversity can deliver competitive advantage and drive innovation. For employers, it requires developing and implementing strategies to overcome the barriers that currently keep some individuals out of the workforce.

Understanding Invisible Diversity

What is Cognitive Diversity?

Cognitive diversity is a broad term to refer to differences in the way people think, act, and are motivated. In the workplace, this includes factors that would cause individuals to problem-solve differently and how people approach intellectual processing.

What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity includes a wide variety of neurodevelopmental conditions that affect a significant share of the population. In the U.S., there are roughly 13 million individuals with ADHD (approximately 4% of the population), 3.5 million with autism spectrum disorder, and 2.9 million with dyslexia. Further, a significant portion of the population may be considered “neurodivergent,” meaning that they possess traits and capabilities associated with specific neurological variances.

What are mental health conditions?

Mental health is related to the ways that people think and feel, or their perceptions, social interactions, or mood. One in five people experience a mental health condition that impacts their daily lives including the ability to perform well at work, regardless of gender, age, race/ethnicity, occupation, or industry. Common conditions include depression, anxiety or eating disorders, and an individual may be living with a singular condition or a complex combination of mental health conditions.

Capabilities and Barriers

The Unique Capabilities of Invisible Diversity

Every person possesses unique and individual traits, skills and capabilities, but they may be obscured, misunderstood or underutilized due to a condition or disability. These attributes can fill skills gaps, drive innovation, and identify overlooked opportunities. The process of implementing a neurodiversity program and workplace mental health support can also deliver other, wide-ranging benefits, such as fostering a culture of inclusion and strengthening job loyalty.

Boosting Capabilities, Productivity, and Efficiency

Many cognitively diverse conditions are strongly associated with negative symptoms or impacts, but research has demonstrated that it can also be associated with a propensity to possess unique skills and abilities that enable superior performance and productivity in key roles:

- **Autistic individuals and people with language-based learning disabilities often have strong skills in mathematics, pattern recognition, creativity, and other areas.** In one study, roughly 30% of autistic people were found to have an exceptional cognitive skill or a savant skill in areas like mathematics and memory.ⁱⁱⁱ Employees with dyslexia often perform well at tasks that rely on visual thinking, pattern recognition, and complex reasoning.^{iv}
- **ADHD and mood disorders like bi-polar disorder and major depression have a strong correlation to creativity.** Studies dating back to the

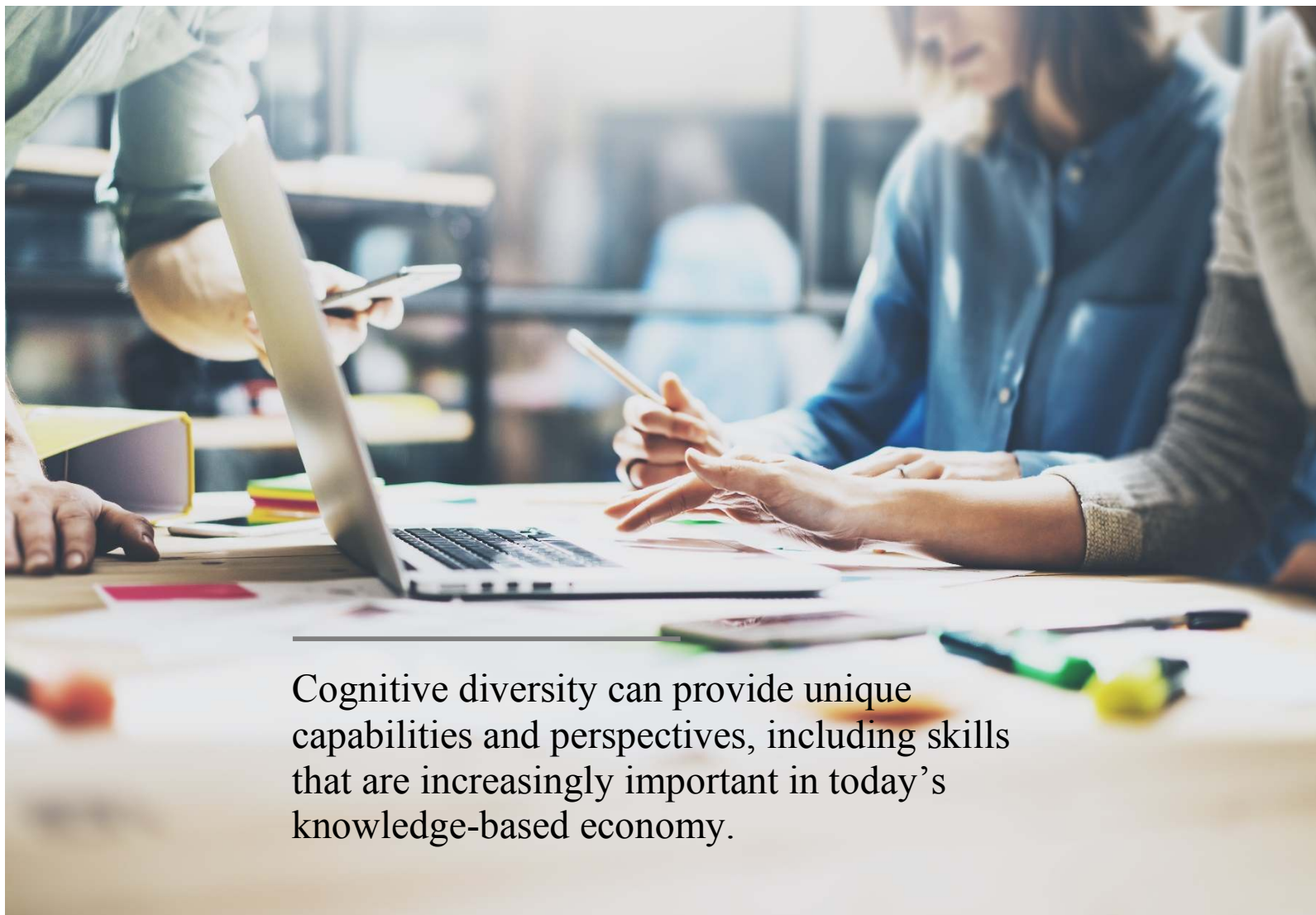
1970s through to the present have supported a predisposition among people with some mental health conditions for creativity, including in visual and literary arts.^v Those with ADHD often have greater creativity and problem-solving abilities.^{vi}

- **Experts suggest anxiety can equip individuals to be better leaders.** Anxiety disorders include panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), or social anxiety disorder (SAD), and a growing amount of research suggest that individuals with these conditions perform as well, if not better, than their peers at group tasks and may be more capable of evaluating situations for

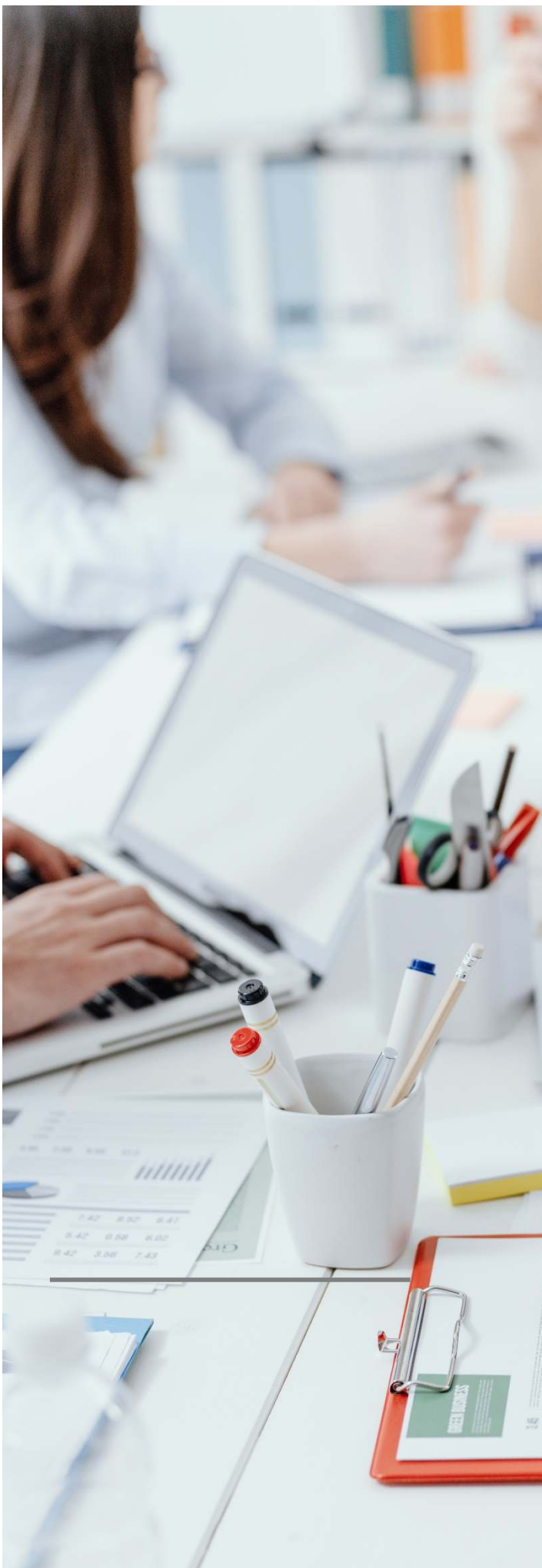
threats and possible outcomes.^{vii viii}

- **Neurodiverse individuals may recognize details their peers miss.** This can help to reduce errors in areas where quality control is essential, such as coding and software development.^{ix} For example, a neurodiverse team at SAP developed a technical fix that delivered \$40 million in savings.^x In a study of more than 50 Australian employers, workers with autism displayed superior rates of attention to detail.^{xi}

- **Cognitive diversity in the workplace has been proven to deliver direct business benefits.** According to EY's head of recruiting for the Middle East and North Africa, some employees with dyslexia, dyspraxia, and Asperger's syndrome rank in the top 2% in certain skills and business areas, such as attention to detail for the assurance business or technical skills for IT work.^{xii} When J.P. Morgan hired workers with autism, it found that they were 50% more productive and learned faster than neurotypical employees.^{xiii}



Cognitive diversity can provide unique capabilities and perspectives, including skills that are increasingly important in today's knowledge-based economy.



Promoting Innovation and Inclusion

In addition to metrics like productivity and efficiency, cognitive diversity can help provide “softer” workplace benefits, such as creativity, problem-solving, and cultural gains:

- **Cognitively diverse people have unique perspectives that can foster innovation.** In interviews at a large private-sector employer and public-sector employer in the UK, managers and workers said that neurodiverse employees were also more likely to challenge accepted workplace practices, which could lead to unexpected solutions and improvements.^{xiv} Some individuals with mental health conditions report that managing their condition in the workplace has helped to develop their empathy and creativity – giving them valuable professional skills.^{xv}
 - **Promoting cognitive diversity can create cultural benefits such as job loyalty, inclusivity, and improved management.** Neurodiverse employees and those with mental health conditions may be more dedicated to their job and employer because many have previously struggled to find a position and recognize the value of supportive environments. Co-workers of neurodiverse people also say that their presence in the workplace promotes a culture of inclusion.^{xvi} Managers note that supervising neurodiverse employees also improves their ability to work with neurotypical people, as they learn how to better leverage individuals’ unique talents.^{xvii}
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Common Barriers to Workplace Invisible Diversity

There are multiple barriers that can prevent cognitively diverse individuals from achieving their full potential in the workforce. Traditional recruiting, hiring, and workplace practices often include hidden barriers that prevent successfully finding and holding jobs. Due to low awareness and misunderstanding of many conditions, employers may not be adequately attracting and retaining cognitively diverse talent.

Misperceptions and Stigma

These factors undermine the communication and flexibility needed to support cognitive diversity alongside physical diversity:

- **Negative perceptions can prevent company leaders, hiring managers, and co-workers from understanding the value of diversity of this kind.** Engaging talent that has “invisible diversity” often requires a proactive approach from employers. Therefore, simply leaving established processes in place means continued barriers. Diversity of all descriptions is more likely to succeed with the support of their co-workers and managers.
- **Fear of stigma can also stop neurodiverse individuals and those with mental health conditions from disclosing their condition and accessing important accommodations.** In a study of tech employees with ADHD and autism, half chose not to disclose their condition because they feared judgment and discrimination.^{xviii} In fact, some workers with autism say that they *stopped* disclosing after negative experiences.^{xix} Disclosure of mental health conditions to employers can be stressful and result in serious repercussions, and even termination. As a result, individuals may struggle to access the accommodations they need, with negative effects for the employee and their employer.

Misperception and stigma are at the core of many of the challenges facing workers.

Challenges in Traditional Employer Processes and Workplaces

Traditional processes, roles, and workplace environments can generate unintended challenges to cognitive diversity:

- **Traditional hiring practices can be a barrier to employment.** For example, people with autism will struggle with the interpersonal interaction that is the basis of a traditional interview.^{xx} Those with dyslexia will struggle with text-based elements of a job application, such as psychometric testing. Because of these barriers, employers’ hiring practices can unintentionally exclude hiring diversity.
- **Inflexible roles and requirements can reduce productivity and job satisfaction.** For example, people with post-traumatic stress disorder may struggle with loud or distracting workplace settings. People with other conditions may benefit from flexible breaks to accommodate needs for rest, medication, or therapy appointments. Appropriate accommodations can typically address these challenges – but this requires tolerance for more flexible roles, tasks, and schedules.
- **The workplace environment may include elements that interfere with employee performance.** This kind of diversity may include employees with sensory processing disorders or who experience sensory sensitivities and may become overstimulated by the lighting, noise, and equipment in a typical work environment.^{xxi} While accommodations like noise-canceling headphones or a private office can solve these problems, this requires communication and flexibility from managers and co-workers.

Recommendations

There are a variety of best practices that can help employers to recruit and retain a cognitively diverse workforce and realize the benefits. Solutions take a multi-tiered approach to hire and integrate neurodiverse people and people with mental health conditions into the workplace, while also supporting their unique needs, work styles, and skills:

- **Partner with expert organizations.** Collaborations with non-profit, government, and community organizations can provide the expertise needed to understand approaches in practice. Companies may also consider sharing knowledge and best practices with each other or through business groups.
- **Start small.** Pilot programs can provide the learnings that are essential for building a company-wide effort. By starting in a single office, function or workforce segment, companies can gradually build to larger initiatives. This helps to develop scalable models and approaches that fit within the organizational culture.
- **Implement non-traditional hiring practices.** By implementing alternative hiring practices, companies can identify, attract, and place candidates in roles that will support their success. Traditional hiring practices can be a barrier particularly for neurodiverse individuals, who may struggle with social interactions or written tests. Therefore, hiring strategies that target and accommodate individuals provide a more effective assessment of these individuals' unique skills.
- **Enable understanding and awareness.** The support of managers and co-workers can be a decisive factor in employees' performance and retention. Companies should strive to enable productive, positive understanding and awareness of cognitive diversity. If employees understand individual differences in information processing, problem solving, and skills as strengths and advantages, they will be more likely to embrace all employees as valuable team members.

- **Create a supportive workplace.** Many neurodiverse employees and people with mental health conditions may benefit from low- or no-cost workplace adjustments that support their work style and needs. Such changes include limiting sources of sensory stimulation, flexible hours or working locations, offering training on soft skills, and providing clear instructions through a variety of channels. An established support network or mentoring system can also help enable productivity and performance.
 - **Emphasize flexibility and customization.** Employee support should be flexible and allow for customized accommodation that is widely available, not just to those who chose to disclose a condition. Ultimately, the most effective solutions will be those developed on-the-ground by managers, co-workers, and employees for their specific situations.
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Case Studies

While there are challenges to building a cognitively diverse workforce, leading companies are already taking action in this area. Major employers are recruiting neurodiverse talent and working to successfully accommodate mental health conditions, integrating both into the workforce and realizing benefits.



In addition to a robust suite of programs aimed at workplace mental health, EY has implemented a comprehensive hiring and training program related to neurodiversity, specifically targeted at individuals on the autism spectrum.^{xxii} The program works with organizations that specialize in neurodiverse recruitment to source appropriate talent. It then screens, assesses, trains, and provides onboarding and support to help them acclimate to their new roles. Throughout this process, the program collaborates with non-profit and government organizations for guidance.

EY has found that neurodiverse employees can automate processes faster than their counterparts and have identified process improvements that cut the time for technical training in half.^{xxiii} New neurodiverse hires have also provided recommendations on best practices to their peers and leadership.

J.P.Morgan

A self-described “knowledge-based workforce” J.P. Morgan has dedicated time and funding to understanding and mitigating mental health challenges within its workforce, particularly focusing on support for remaining in a position and returning to work after a mental health-related absence because of the benefits to retaining talent.

J.P. Morgan also runs Autism at Work, a program that aims to hire neurodiverse employees. Thus far, the initiative has led to the hiring of 30 individuals with autism, and leaders expect to hire hundreds in the years to come.^{xxiv} To be effective, J.P. Morgan partners with autism-focused organizations to reach neurodiverse individuals outside of the traditional hiring model.^{xxv} The company recognizes the benefits of incorporating neurodiverse individuals and sees neurological variances as strengths. This initiative has already begun to yield significant results, with neurodiverse talent increasing efficiency and organization.



For more than four years, Hewlett Packard has been implementing programs to attract neurodiverse talent and measure their progress.^{xxvi} The preliminary findings reveal that the company's neurodiverse testing teams are 30% more productive than their counterparts. In fact, Hewlett Packard has partnered with the Australian Defense Department to develop a neurodiversity program in cybersecurity. Through these efforts, neurodiverse individuals have demonstrated the value of their unique perspectives and abilities. The HP Wellness program for stress management has also measurably positively impacted absenteeism, workplace injury, staff turnover, employee satisfaction and employer perception.



Already a leading global roll-out of integrated EAP and wellness programs, Levi's has built the business case for mental health programs internally with hard data, addressing health service provider network barriers and encouraging providers to coordinate to provide improved access to mental health services for employees in addition to workplace accommodations.



Microsoft has altered its hiring strategy to engage and recruit neurodiverse individuals.^{xxvii} In particular, the company seeks to place candidates with autism in roles where they are proven to have high rates of success. These potential new hires have the opportunity to engage with managers and staff to match their skills to specific roles. These programs allow neurodiverse new hires to demonstrate their strengths and give Microsoft a better understanding of their skills and likely success.



Northwell Health provides multiple well-being, mental health education, and stress relief programs for employees, including creating an interactive app to help employees identify and address possible mental health needs. The organization is planning to expand case management for costly, chronic conditions to include mental illness that would further support employee talent impacted by mental health conditions.



SAP has more than four years of experience running neurodiversity programs.^{xxviii} In particular, the company has introduced a learning module that teaches soft skills to employees who may have trouble adjusting to the traditional professional environment. The company has also partnered across sectors, working with organizations like California's Department of Rehabilitation, Pennsylvania's Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, The Arc and Expandability, and EnAbleIndia to improve screening measures, arrange public funding for training, and provide ongoing support for integration. As a result, these programs have improved productivity and quality control, boosted innovative capabilities, and increased employee engagement.



In early 2017, UBS announced a pilot program to hire adults with autism.^{xxix} The program was created in collaboration with the Vanderbilt Initiative for Autism, Innovation, and the Workforce and The Precisionists, an organization dedicated to creating jobs for individuals with a range of disabilities. Participants in the programs are employed by The Precisionists and perform contracted, project-based work for UBS. This cross-sector initiative leverages the expertise and resources of multiple organizations to provide comprehensive assessment, training, and analysis of employee performance and overall program success.



Willis Towers Watson launched a neurodiversity effort after identifying an opportunity to acquire talent for data specialist roles that lend themselves to the capabilities of people with autism. The company first focused on a pilot program for a small number of hires, developing a nuanced understanding of employees' needs and abilities. The program also included education and training to promote sensitivity to neurodiversity among existing employees. After the pilot's success, it was expanded to new offices and countries.



About One Mind at Work

Most of the world's population spends one-third of their adult lives at work. The workplace and its leaders have a tremendous opportunity to improve quality of life for all people and play a critical role in driving mental health solutions. One Mind at Work is a global employer-led coalition, collaborating across sectors, industries, and national boundaries to transform workplace approaches to mental health. One Mind at Work corporate members and non-profit partners include ADP, American Psychiatric Association Foundation, Arogya World, Atmos Energy, Bank of America, Johnson & Johnson, the Kennedy Forum, Levi Strauss and Co., Otsuka Pharmaceuticals, Silicon Valley Bank, and Steinberg Institute, Sutter Health.

Contact

Garen Staglin
PO Box 680 Rutherford, CA 94573
1570 Bella Oaks Lane Rutherford, CA 94573
707.963.1749
Garen.Staglin@onemind.org
www.onemindinitiative.org

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