

Unlock The Power of Neurodiverse Survivors - 4 Strategies to Tap Into The Strengths Of Diverse Minds

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Do you work with someone who often finishes the sentences of others before they can? Or are you sometimes stunned by individuals in your organization that tend to notice details that others don't?

Then you might be working with someone who is neurodivergent. Neurodiversity is an umbrella term for all neurological differences, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, and other a lot of other neurological differences. The term highlights all neurological profiles as a natural and valuable form of human diversity needed for solving complex problems and further evolution. While society sees neurodiverse entrepreneurs such as Steve Jobs (diagnosed with Dyslexia) and Elon Musk (diagnosed with Autism) as important disruptive thinkers and pioneers paving the way for innovations and future tech directions, most of the neurodiverse individuals in organizations remain stigmatized.

We contrasted the experience of 17 neurodiverse entrepreneurs that left bigger organizations with 35 neurodiverse employees and found that neurodiverse employees transfer into entrepreneurship as a result of being treated as “less than” by others at their organizations. That is, despite rising evidence that neurodiverse abilities such as visual thinking, attention to detail, pattern recognition, and visual memory can help organizations find new opportunities. By being treated differently, some identified structural barriers for all neurodiverse individuals and felt empowered to change those barriers by entering entrepreneurship. Yet, others froze in their positions, acted on their experiences, and decide to lower their ambitions and tolerate being forced to mask their differences. Such “survivors” stay in their positions to avoid the risk of being self-employed.

Around 15-20 % of the world's population is neurodiverse. It is, therefore, especially important for organizations to pay attention to a neuroinclusive environment. Once employees transfer into “survivors” and enter “silent quitting”, all their valuable potential to think outside the box is lost.

How to avoid turning employees into survivors?

Our data shows that line managers give or deny access to crucial adjustments that either help or harm the workflow and success of neurodiverse employees. The career path of neurodiverse individuals seems to depend highly on the understanding and flexibility of their line managers. Any changes in management, misunderstandings, or inflexibility of the line manager ultimately result in immediate consequences for the workflow. Given that line managers can bottleneck resources and prevent neurodiverse individuals from thriving in their environment and forcing them to adapt to difficult working conditions has important practical implications.

Not only neurodiverse employees benefit from a neuroinclusive working environment - sooner or later other employees will suffer from the same unhealthy working conditions and make similar adjustments to those we see in our sample of neurodiverse individuals.

4 Strategies to avoid losing high-potential employees

Organizations to date have a wrong understanding of neuroinclusion. Neurodiverse employees and entrepreneurs point out the following strategies, which are crucial for future work paths:

1. *Organizations should react with flexibility in working hours.* For some it raises the attractiveness of the employer; for others, it is a necessity to be able to do their job. A flexible work schedule can allow to take time off for therapy appointments, decompress after intense meetings or use hyperfocus when it occurs. However, while flexible schedules may be desirable for some neurodivergent individuals, for others, a routine is what makes them thrive. It is therefore important that organizations not only foster a culture of flexibility but also give routines to those who need them. By making it part of their policy and giving leaders the resources to accommodate individual needs, organizations can make sure that all needs are met.
2. *Growth and career path mean different things to different individuals.* While some enjoy pursuing a career as a leader, others might not. Some enjoy working in teams and need social settings to thrive, others might prefer to work alone. Thus, to ensure success in a role, it is important for organizations to craft individualized approaches based on each individual employee's preferences that recognize the goals, capabilities, and strengths of the individual—whether neurodivergent or neurotypical.
3. *Neurodiversity is often invisible.* Therefore, employees with neurodivergent features are often forced to disclose their condition without knowing if their features qualify as a sufficient disability allowing them to receive needed accommodations. Thus, only clear organizational policies can ensure that everyone understands which accommodations and reasonable adjustments are offered. Otherwise, they might remain as unspoken rules or stigmatization traps for help-seeking employees.
4. *Each neurodivergent person is unique,* and it wouldn't be accurate to generalize their cognitive process. Organizations should install privacy policies to protect information on neurodiverse employees' diagnoses or tendencies. As neurodivergent employees feel more and more safe in their roles, it is important to integrate their opinion into the diversity policies of the organization.

In short, the abilities of neurodiverse individuals are important assets for organizations to gain a competitive edge. It's crucial for employers to reconsider their strategies to better serve all neurotypes – ensure that all employees feel like they have a seat at the table and keep quiet quitting and exodus into entrepreneurship at bay.

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