

Time for a radical rethink on neurodiversity

by David Press - Managing Director, DMJ
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Companies need a radical rethink of their whole working environment if they want to attract the very best talent among a largely untapped talent pool – the neurodiverse, including people with autism and ADHD.

“The ability to think differently from everyone else means the neurodiverse can cut through the noise and provide a company with

the competitive advantage it so desperately needs.” This is the view of Adam Tobias from Inventum Group, a talent consultancy that provides inclusive and sustainable people solutions. “They often have a superpower, and it’s high time companies woke up to this fact.”

Sabine Dembkowski at Better Boards - which help boards, Chairs and CEOs become the best they can be -

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agrees. “There’s been some decent progress the last few years in terms of boardroom gender imbalance, and to a certain extent their ethnic mix. But in terms of neurodiversity we’re nowhere close to where we need to be. Too many boards just want to stay within their comfort zone, to appoint someone else just like them. But as business problems become increasingly complex, companies that don’t embrace true diversity of thinking are far more likely to fail.”

Many great talents have been neurodiverse, including Richard Branson (dyslexia), Albert Einstein (dyslexia), Charles Schwab (ADHD) and Bill Gates (autism). In fact one in ten people with autism have been linked with Savant Syndrome, which gives them exceptional skills, often in music, art, or maths. “As well as truly exceptional talents, they’ll often have a skillset that’s more focused and analytical than others,” says Poppy Taylor, a senior consultant at DMJ Recruitment. She has a Masters in Clinical Neurodevelopmental Sciences and is passionate about increasing neurodiversity in the workplace. “They make exceptional candidates for a good number of roles, particularly those that involve considerable attention to detail such as IT, accountancy and research.”

But to recruit the very best neurodiverse people companies often need a radical rethink.

“If they’re to flourish,” Sabine Dembkowski says, “boards need to think outside of their normal boxes. And that starts right at the beginning with the hiring process, they need to create a completely different brief.”

Adam Tobias recommends employers think very hard about the questions they ask candidates to ensure they are playing to neurodiverse people’s strengths. “So many companies have fundamentally the same interview process they’ve always had, which sets up neurodiverse people to fail. They often focus on social competencies, which, for example, people with autism may find extremely challenging. They just won’t understand social norms or respond to social cues. But if the interview focussed on tasks instead, they’d shine. Companies need a radical rethink of how they interview neurodiverse people.”

And once you’ve hired someone who is neurodiverse, there’s still work to be done. “A little thought before someone with autism joins could make a world of difference

to their feeling of contentment and the quality of their work,” says Poppy Taylor. “Communication and social interaction with others can be challenging. They can come across as aloof, uninterested or even rude, and this just isn’t the case. Employers need to ensure the whole team are aware of this, and work round these difficulties to get the very best out of them and ensure they stay.”

Autistic people work better with clear and concise instruction and change can be challenging for them, so this often needs to be carefully managed. Many autistic people also have sensory issues, including hyper-sensitivities to sound and sights, so making additional equipment such as headphones available to them or a different desk position could improve the quality of their working environment enormously.

“The new trend of increased working from home,” says Poppy Taylor, “certainly helps people with autism in

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many ways, as it reduces their social interaction with others. But it's vital that their manager ensures they don't become isolated from the rest of their team."

Around 5% of the population have been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and symptoms include an inability to concentrate on one thing for long periods of time, an inability to work to deadlines, increased irritability and poor organisational skills.

Yet people with ADHD can have many extremely positive attributes too. "They can be highly creative," Adam Tobias says, "they often bring a real energy and positivity to the workplace. But employing neurodiverse people often isn't straightforward. There have to be adaptations made to many of your usual processes. You're going to make mistakes along the way, of course you are. But the rewards are enormous."

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colleagues'," Poppy Taylor says, "so it's vital you give people with ADHD the flexibility they need. Let them walk around the office and have regular breaks. They'll also work better with their own deadlines on projects and working at their own pace. They may find it easier to juggle multiple roles at once. To get the very best out of them you need to understand their needs to ensure they're given the chance to really shine. And for your business to reap the many rewards of employing them," she says.

There are several initial steps companies can take to develop their hiring processes to become

more neuro-inclusive. Considering whether conversational competency questions should only be required at the first stage or whether leaning further on performance tests is a good start – these options will reduce 'conversational personability' being the focus of suitability. Additionally, updating training to ensure all managers and mentors understand the different ways of working with the neurodiverse will not only create a more inclusive hiring process but also improve manager approach for all staff members.

To talk to Poppy Taylor please email her at: Poppy@dmjcosec.com ■

About DMJ

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