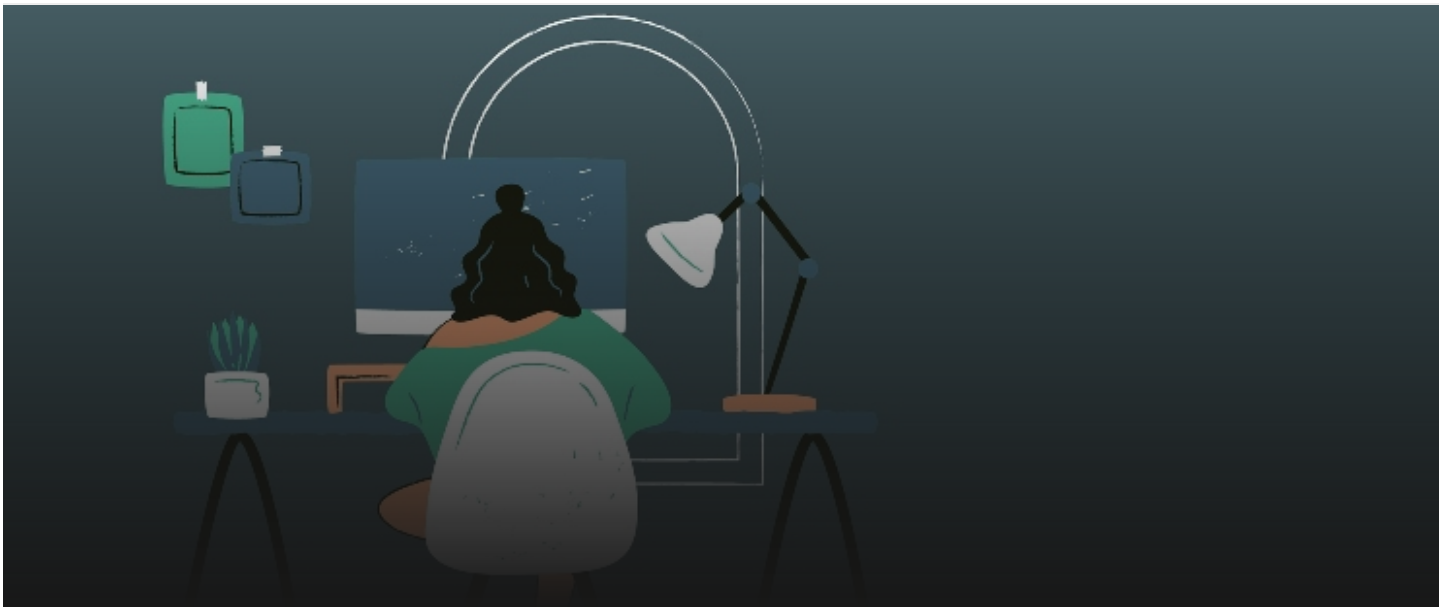


Catherine Bouckley February 24th, 2022

Neurotypical privilege in the labour market

Estimated reading time: 3 minutes

Neurotypical people order their thoughts and communicate ideas in the most typical way. They enjoy a privilege that comes from living in a world that favours and is built for this specific neurology. However, the exclusion of neurodivergent people is bad for the workforce. ***Catherine Bouckley*** *writes that neurodivergence makes an important contribution to cognitive diversity, which drives better performance and limits groupthink within organisations.*

Privilege in the Workplace **series - The Inclusion Initiative - #TIIThursday**

Neurotypical privilege is the special and unearned advantage afforded by those who happen to have the most common cognitive expression (Miller, 2020); these individuals, herein neurotypicals, order their thoughts and communicate ideas in the most typically seen way. The privilege comes from living in a world that favours and is built for this specific neurology. Historically, people with a different neurology, herein neurodivergent individuals, are diagnosed with neurodevelopmental conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit [hyperactivity] disorder (AD[H]D), dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, and Tourette's syndrome. This conventional approach of medicalising neurodivergence rejects the neurodiversity paradigm, which views neurodivergence as a natural human variation, and causes neurodivergent individuals to be automatically disadvantaged. This problem is reflected in labour market outcomes; four in five autistic people are unemployed, as compared to one in five non-disabled people[1] (ONS, 2021). Currently, autism, which was added to the survey last year, is the only type of neurodivergence that the Office for National Statistics collects employment data on. This is an issue as, without any data on other types of neurodivergence, we are unable to know the extent of the unemployment gap between neurotypicals and neurodivergent individuals.

Explaining the employment gap

The Institute of Leadership and Management (2020) found 50% of managers were willing to admit their discomfort in hiring neurodivergent individuals. The bias was highest against those with ADHD or Tourette's syndrome with one in three employers reporting they would feel uncomfortable employing or managing an individual with either condition. The same was said by one in four managers for autism or dyscalculia, one in five for dyspraxia and one in ten for dyslexia. Therefore, many neurodivergent people "*experience exclusion, discrimination and damaging stereotyping within the workplace*"

(Institute of Leadership & Management, 2020, p. 4). These statistics are likely to be biased downwards by the respondents' desire to provide socially desirable responses (Krumpal, 2013).

Neurodivergent people who do manage to secure employment may struggle in traditional work contexts designed by neurotypicals for neurotypicals. In this case, when the environment or processes are not flexible enough to enable employees to flourish, regardless of their neurological makeup, neurodivergent employees often underachieve compared to their counterparts. This is because they are "*specialists*" rather than "*generalists*" (Doyle, 2019), which means they excel in some areas but might significantly underperform in others (CIPD, 2018). As one autistic employee put it, "*The problem is not so much that [neurodivergent people] have disabilities but there are too many disabling organisations*" (CIPD, 2018, p. 25). This seeming underperformance leads to challenges in rising to the top of organisations (CIPD, 2018; GMB, 2018). This is exactly what the Office for National Statistics found; disabled people in work were 8% less likely to be employed as managers, directors, or senior officials (ONS, 2021).

The problem of neurotypical privilege in the labour market is evident from networking to the office layout due to organisations' consistent preference for neuronormative behaviour and more generally, communication. This will be discussed below.

Networking

Networking can play an integral part in securing employment. Since humans are typically risk and ambiguity averse, a candidate known to the hiring manager, or someone that they trust, can make the more familiar individual seem like the safer option. However, candidates often come to know others through networking, which requires socialising. Many neurodivergent individuals, particularly those who are autistic, socialise differently to neurotypicals (Gillespie-Lynch et al., 2017) and therefore the

networking system, which is inherently built on neurotypical privilege, discriminates against neurodivergent people (Fairnas, 2016).

Interviews

Traditional unstructured panel interviews are a test of social skills rather than competency for the advertised role. Interviewers expect candidates to maintain eye contact, have a particular body language and provide well-rehearsed answers (Frauendorfer & Schmid Mast, 2015). For example, when asked about their weaknesses, candidates are expected to reframe a negative trait in a positive light rather than provide actual honesty, which can be challenging for many neurodivergent people who are more likely to provide very literal and honest answers (Maras et al., 2020). This type of interview essentially recruits candidates who behave in line with social norms rather than recruiting the candidate who is best suited to the job.

HR process

After getting the job, neurotypicals do not need to discuss their neurology with Human Resources (HR). In contrast, given most workplaces accommodate only neurotypicals, neurodivergent employees will need to use their neurology to justify making certain requests that are not offered by default. For example, noise-cancelling headphones, removal of fluorescent lights and flexibility regarding hours, so travel is not during rush hour. While travelling like a 'sardine on a packed train' is not fun for anyone, this scenario can be particularly anxiety-inducing for many individuals including some neurodivergent people due to sensory overwhelming (Doyle, 2020).

Office environments

Typical office setups include sitting as groups, hot-desking and working in a noisy atmosphere (Morrison & Macky, 2017). This reflects neuronormative behaviour as many neurodivergent individuals do not share neurotypicals' desire to be social, ease with changing environment,

and ability to focus on work in loud environments. Prior to COVID-19, performing roles in offices that could be conducted at home demonstrates neurotypical privilege as some neurodivergent people struggle with travelling or fear even leaving the house (Doyle, 2019; BBC, 2014). The pandemic has only worsened these individuals' fears, making them fearful of a novel virus, and has further entrenched inequality between neurodivergent people and neurotypicals (National Autistic Society, 2020; den Houting, 2020).

Communication

Throughout the hiring process and while working, employers communicate to neurotypicals, and exclude neurodivergent people through their use of non-verbal, contextual, and emotional cues (Hode, 2012). Some neurodivergent people, who use language literally, struggle to understand the intended meaning of this communication (Austin & Pisano, 2017), which creates confusion and frustration not faced by those who grasp this nuanced language with ease.

Preference for neuronormative behaviour

Neurotypical privilege relates to a preference for neuronormative behaviour – this affects every labour market outcome. Employers want employees to be empathetic, non-egocentric, not overly literal or direct, high functioning in groups, tolerant of control, and to conform to social norms (Hode, 2012). Therefore, neurotypicals do not need to alter or suppress their natural ways of moving, interacting or expressing emotion (Nickerson, 2019).

A neurodivergent individual eloquently highlighted the problem by parodically 'turning it on its head' by describing neurotypical syndrome (Institute for the Study of the Neurologically Typical, 2002):

"Neurotypical syndrome is a neurobiological disorder characterized by preoccupation with social concerns, delusions of superiority, and obsession with conformity. Neurotypical individuals (NTs) often assume

that their experience of the world is either the only one, or the only correct one. NTs find it difficult to be alone. NTs are often intolerant of seemingly minor differences in others. When in groups NTs are socially and behaviourally rigid, and frequently insist upon the performance of dysfunctional, destructive, and even impossible rituals as a way of maintaining group identity. NTs find it difficult to communicate directly and have a much higher incidence of lying as compared to persons on the autistic spectrum."

The impact of the [neurotypical privilege] problem

By having solely neurotypicals design the recruitment process and work environments, we exclude neurodivergent people. This includes those unaware of their neurodivergence and lack of privilege, which are many as the general population knows little about neurodivergence due partly to a lack of research (Doyle & McDowall, 2021).

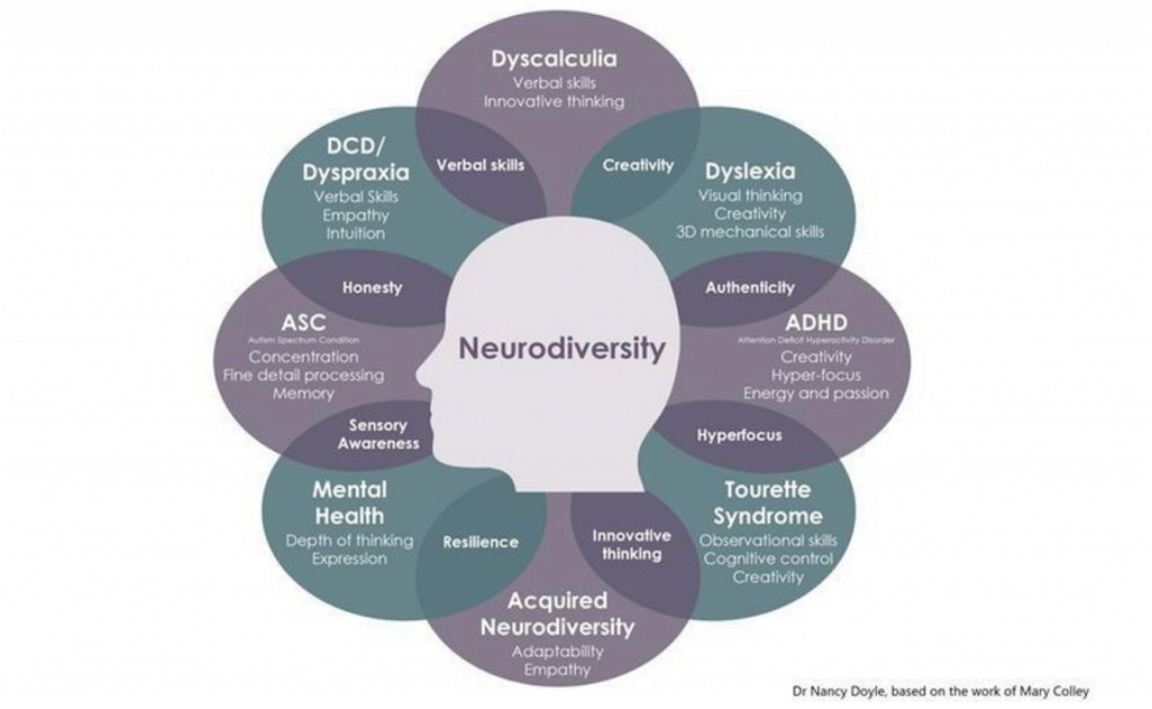
The exclusion matters for several reasons:

The first reason is that it is unintentional discrimination. On a micro level, being ostracised produces "*the only psychological effect that has the same neurological impact as physical pain*" (Black, 2016). Therefore, it has negative impacts on the individual's wellbeing and mental health. On a macro level, mental health problems lead to increased government expenditure on therapies and medication and the costs (direct and indirect) can exceed 4% of GDP (OECD, 2014). Moreover, systematically excluding a population subgroup from the workforce is unethical and perpetuates inequality.

Second, the exclusion of neurodivergent people is bad for the workforce. Neurodivergence makes an important contribution to cognitive diversity and there is a plethora of evidence that this drives better performance and limits groupthink within organisations (Duchek et al., 2020; Syed,

2020). When an organisation inclusively leverages diversity of talent, perspectives, and skills, this results in enhanced creativity and innovation (Austin & Pisano, 2017). More specifically, many neurodivergent people have unique and unusual strengths (see Figure 1) that enable them to think, visualise, and solve problems in ways neurotypicals tend not to. This is evidenced by neurodiverse software testing teams at Australia's Department of Human Services being 30% more productive than the other teams (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Moreover, JPMorgan Chase found that a neurodiverse team demonstrated 48% higher productivity over a neurotypical team in a side-by-side comparison (Djurdjevic, 2019).

Figure 1. The strengths of neurodivergent people



Third, excluding neurodivergent individuals means their voices are not represented in the creation of products. Given an estimated 15% or more of the population are neurodivergent (Acas, 2019), a lack of neurodivergent representation in the decision-making and design processes means the products do not speak to these individuals.

Finally, organisations that have neurodiversity programs, which are designed to recruit neurodivergent candidates, find that it makes for better managers. As the senior vice president of digital business services from SAP says, it "*forces you to get to know the person better, so you know how to manage them*" (Austin & Pisano, 2017). By working to identify and leverage the individual talents of *all* employees, the entire workforce benefits from the inclusion of neurodivergent people. It is, therefore, unsurprising to learn that employee engagement rises in teams that neurodiversity programs touch (Austin & Pisano, 2017).

To benefit from the untapped pool of neurodivergent talent, businesses must, therefore, work to remove neurotypical privilege. Going beyond ethics, a neurodiverse workforce will provide a competitive edge within their industry (Hofman, 2020). In fact, HPE South Pacific, which is a company with one of the largest neurodiversity programs, says that it is the initiative that yields benefits at the highest levels (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Organisations must try to understand what can be done to change recruitment processes and work environments so the potential of neurodivergent people can be properly identified and maximised. To do this, we must abandon four workplace norms. These are "*numeracy, literacy, the ability to sit still and concentrate, and the ability to engage in the kind of communication that involves eye contact and disingenuous politeness*" (Doyle, 2018). As Nancy Doyle (2018), occupational psychiatrist and founder of social enterprise 'Genius Within', writes:

"40 years ago, Dave, who was great at analysing data, was allowed to sit in his office, not go to team meetings and not go to the pub on Friday. And that was fine because he was brilliant with data. But in a modern workplace, you have to have an annual appraisal where you get rated on your team skills and influencing ability. These days, Dave has to get five out of ten on his influencing, or he won't get a promotion."

If hiring processes and workplace setups are flexible enough to accommodate the needs of the neurodiverse population, then it is a step

towards reducing the impact that privilege, be it due to neurology or some other status, plays in securing and maintaining employment.

Reducing the impact that neurotypical privilege has in the labour market has further implications; decreasing the unemployment rate of neurodivergent people means a reduction in money spent on benefits and an increase in the number of people contributing to taxes.

How has this been addressed?

Over the past eight years, organisations such as SAP, Microsoft, Ford, EY, Deloitte, IBM, JPMorgan Chase, and UBS have begun to set up neurodiversity programs. The majority of these have worked with the Specialisterne Foundation, whose approach comprises of seven elements (Austin & Pisano, 2017):

1. Seek expertise from "social partners" (e.g., government or non-profit organisations that support those with disabilities to secure employment)

2. Forget traditional interview-based assessments in favour of task-based assessment periods

3. Train existing employees, in particular managers

4. Create support circles for the workplace and for an employee's personal life

5. Manage careers through clear, specific goals

6. Scale the program beyond the roles traditionally assigned to neurodivergent individuals (e.g., software testing and cybersecurity)

7. Mainstream the program so that there is no need for a dedicated neurodiversity program

More generally, and due to the movement towards unbiased hiring processes, many companies are assessing candidates using task-based performances. However, this is typically in addition to interview-based

assessments. Therefore, organisations need to be made aware of the relatively unspoken neurotypical privilege and actively work to tap into the neurodivergent pool of talent to close the employment gap.

How can it be addressed?

Given neurodiversity is the relatively new, undiscussed arm of the ongoing diversity, equity and inclusion movement, institutions must speak out about the neurotypical privilege problem to begin to eradicate it from the labour market. They should make salient the statistics relating to unemployment and underemployment before highlighting the strengths neurodivergent individuals can bring to the workplace. HR publications can go a step further and publicise the emerging norm of neurodiversity programs to hiring managers and that recruiting from this largely untapped pool of talent may give organisations a competitive advantage. This action of making public a norm leverages our innate desire to 'follow the herd' (Dolan et al., 2012) while linking it to a clear actionable change: set up a neurodiversity program or make sure your current process captures neurodivergent candidates.

Organisations, having bought into the business advantages of employing a neurodiverse workforce, should make public commitments. For example, in 2017, SAP committed to making 1% of its workforce neurodivergent by 2020, which corresponds to the approximate percentage of the population who are autistic (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Public acts like these are helpful in three ways. First, it continues efforts to make the neurotypical privilege problem known. Second, it communicates to neurodivergent people that the organisation is actively seeking them out, which can provide much-needed confidence to candidates who have most likely been knocked back by traditional hiring processes (CIPD, 2018). Finally, it ensures the company works hard to achieve this goal to be consistent with public promises (Dolan et al., 2012). Those companies leading the way in this regard should be publicly

recognised and celebrated. While inclusive hiring processes should be the norm and not the exception, the reality is that neurotypical privilege exists and requires hard work to overcome. Redesigning recruitment, training, working, and performance processes is no simple task and while these are steps to remove discrimination, this does not mean the work should not be celebrated. Recognising the efforts will make the employees of the organisation feel good and this in turn motivates further prosocial behaviour (Meier & Stutzer, 2008).

Finally, there should be efforts from organisations to understand the sometimes highly unique strengths that neurodivergent people can have that make them as able, and sometimes more able, than neurotypical employees (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Language should evolve to reflect this and neurodivergence should be reframed from a problem to an asset that could lead to a competitive advantage where relevant.

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Notes:

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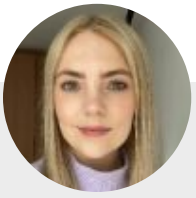

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