

Intersectional neurodiversity

Fostering an inclusive workplace culture



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Executive summary

In recent years, employers have redesigned their benefit offerings to consider their employees holistically. Programs on financial readiness and mental health in the workplace have been added to traditional benefits packages that include health care and insurance, retirement contributions, and vacation days. As employers grapple with attracting and retaining top talent, these expanded benefit offerings have become a necessity rather than a differentiator.

But employees aren't satisfied with more holistic benefits. Top talent increasingly seeks employers who value their skills and who they are. Employees highly value a positive workplace culture, especially one that encourages productivity and innovation. Employers will struggle to find top talent unless their search includes **neurodivergent** individuals — those who exhibit natural variations (from neurotypical individuals) in thinking processes, behaviors, learning styles, motivations and interpersonal interactions.

In the last decade, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) efforts in the workplace have fluctuated drastically.¹ According to LinkedIn, the number of people globally with a title akin to “head of diversity” more than doubled between 2015 and 2020, with a 71% increase in diversity roles over that same time period.² In the last year, however, Indeed, a leading jobs and hiring platform, has seen DEI job postings drop by 38%,³ and Revelio Labs released a report showing that DEI roles diminished at a faster rate than non-DEI positions in 2021, a trend that accelerated in 2022.⁴ Even though research has shown that assembling diverse teams leads to both higher performance and higher satisfaction among employees, these industry trends reflect otherwise.⁵

“Belonging” as a concept is becoming critical for employers to attract and retain the best talent, and it's increasingly becoming a part of DEI efforts. Ideally, diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging (DEIB) initiatives should be fully integrated into employers' policies, programs and agendas. When considering the concentrated upticks and downticks in diversity initiatives in the last decade, it's unclear whether to read the DEIB movement as a short-term fad or a long-term commitment to change. Forward-thinking businesses focused on recruiting and retaining top talent, while seeking to increase productivity, will push for the latter.

Diversity initiatives shouldn't be about ticking boxes. “Belonging” has newly been integrated into DEI, adding to it the opportunity for employees to publicly embrace all aspects of their identities and feel comfortable and valued when doing so.

If employers are to be fully committed to DEIB initiatives, it would involve making their recruitment processes equitable for neurodiverse talent. New policies and practices should strive to be inclusive not just of one label, but intersectionally across gender, sexual orientation and mental health conditions.

Though intersectionality can be complex, the philosophy behind inclusive cultures shouldn't be. Inclusive cultures, policies and programs that are good for one employee are likely good for all employees. Fostering a culture of belonging, open communication and flexibility will lead to better outcomes of performance, recruitment, retention and employee well-being.

This report discusses the importance of neurodiversity in the workplace, with an emphasis on intersectional neurodiversity and its role in DEIB efforts. The report seeks to contribute to the conversation on inclusive workplace culture by:

- Providing a brief history of the neurodiversity movement and its relevance to current and future workplace policies and programs
- Describing the concept of intersectional neurodiversity and why it matters in the workplace
- Illuminating strategies for creating neuroinclusive cultures in the workplace



Bringing neurodiversity into workplace DEIB initiatives

The language of diversity, equity and inclusion has a new rising term: belonging. Amid the ongoing discussions surrounding workplace dynamics, “belonging” has emerged as a pivotal concept that extends beyond mere representation. It encapsulates the need for employees to feel valued, respected and accepted for their complete and authentic selves.

Adding “belonging” to any DEI initiative creates an environment where individuals don’t just occupy space or check a box, they’re embraced for who they are. Belonging is rooted in the idea of acceptance, and organizations face the challenge of creating environments in which this value is the norm. At its core, belonging centers on creating an atmosphere where employees can confidently bring all facets of their identity to the forefront, including aspects such as gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious beliefs and more.

When employees can be their authentic selves, they can fully engage with their work, collaborate more effectively, and contribute unique perspectives that drive innovation. This sense of belonging not only enhances individual well-being, it also collectively enriches an organization’s culture.

The concept of neurodiversity refers to the inherent diversity of human brains, giving rise to natural variations in thinking processes, behaviors, learning styles, motivations and interpersonal interactions. Research underscores that a substantial portion of the adult population, ranging from 15% to 33%,^{6,7} identifies as neurodivergent, emphasizing the significance of recognizing and accommodating these variations.⁸

Discussions of neurodiversity are often exclusive of intersectional identities. It’s critical to recognize that neurodiversity spans a broad spectrum, and that lived experiences of neurodivergence aren’t limited to one gender, color, age or ethnicity.

For employers, it’s imperative to understand that neurodivergence is prevalent not only among an organization’s **existing** workforce, but also within that organization’s **potential** talent pool. Embracing neurodiversity further enhances diverse representation and empowers organizations to broaden their perspectives and tap into unique talents and insights.

Why does intersectional neurodiversity matter?

The prominence of DEIB has grown throughout the corporate world, spurred on by an increasing awareness of the benefits to innovation, productivity and agility that diverse, inclusive workplace cultures can bring. Studies have demonstrated that diverse management teams can drive up to 19% higher revenue.⁹

As focus on DEIB has grown, employers have begun to explore the role of neuroinclusivity in building an equitable and sustainable workplace. Some leading companies have already grown their neurodiversity strategies — and are reaping the benefits. For example, Hewlett Packard Enterprise's efforts to increase its neurodiversity hiring resulted in neurodiverse teams being 30% more productive than neurotypical teams.¹⁰

While neurodivergence isn't limited to one gender, color, age or ethnicity, our understanding of neurodiversity to date has relied on a narrow lens of research and a great deal of implicit biases. Disregarding neurodivergence across all demographics gives us a small view of who it affects. Building a narrative of neurodivergence around a limited scope of individuals is a disservice to those who are impacted by it.

Such dynamics affect the ability of workplace inclusivity efforts to achieve their intended purpose. When neuroinclusive hiring programs require candidates to self-report their neurodivergence, for example, they unfairly exclude candidates who've been unable to receive a diagnosis due to socioeconomic difficulties or biases in diagnostic procedures. The diagnostic disparity also affects individuals in less direct ways. Many were misdiagnosed as simply "poorly behaved" children, and thus were unable to access resources that may have helped them navigate their neurodivergence from the outset.

In addition to the consequences of diagnostic disparities, neurodivergent employees with other minority identities face another key challenge: disclosure. Neurodivergence can be a hidden identity — the act of mimicking behaviors that better fit with societal norms is called "masking" — and self-identifying in the workplace requires an internal negotiation of vulnerability. It requires employees to ask themselves how this will impact their manager's perception of their performance or their ability to ascend in an organization. Additionally, some individuals may not feel comfortable divulging their diagnoses or may be grappling with what these labels mean to them, and thus they may be reluctant to speak with their employers about these diagnoses.

Where did this movement start, and where might it be going?

The autistic rights movement of the 1990s spurred the onset of the neurodiversity movement. The term “neurodiversity” was coined by Australian sociologist Judy Singer, who argued that not all individuals process information in the same way.¹¹ Since then, a central tenet to the movement has become that neurodivergent individuals should be seen through a strengths-based rather than a deficit-based approach. This shift is reflected in the evolution of language to describe neurodivergent individuals. While Singer herself had an autism diagnosis, the term “neurodiversity” encompasses any number of variations from neurotypical behavior, including learning and developmental differences and mental health conditions.

As related to the workplace, neurodiversity within teams has been proven to result in better business outcomes, such as productivity and retention.¹² But the movement toward better workplace mental health is about creating a professional environment where employees can thrive, choosing to bring themselves to work as they desire. Neurodivergent individuals should not be an exception to this central tenet.

Being fully committed to DEIB initiatives now is coming with more scrutiny and accountability. If modern organizations want to remain competitive in their industries, recognizing that diversity extends beyond gender and ethnicity, and creating cultures, policies and programs to support a diverse workforce, are paramount.

If organizations are truly committed to creating inclusive workplaces, recognizing all aspects of diversity will be critical.

The talent pool looks different than it used to, as rates of neurodivergence are increasing, especially among women, people of color and transgender individuals.¹³ Employers need to pay attention to this trend.

While workplace policies have begun to adapt to the reality that their workforces aren't homogenous, creating a culture of true inclusivity remains a challenge. Neurodiversity is a relatively new movement and thus lacks data that broader workplace mental health policies and programs have collected. As such, employers have an opportunity to shape the movement, its relevance and adoption into workplaces. Three main avenues for enhancing culture on intersectional neurodiversity in the workplace are emerging:

- Creative new policies and programs
- Better metrics and data collection, including on outcomes of neurodiverse teams
- Shaping future corporate culture

1. Creative new policies and programs

These initiatives refer to innovative approaches that companies adopt to accommodate and support neurodiverse employees. This might include flexible work arrangements, mentorship programs, sensory-friendly workspaces and tailored onboarding processes. Crucially, any new policies and programs affecting employees, including neurodivergent employees, should be created in collaboration with those employees.

2. Better metrics and data collection, including on outcomes of neurodiverse teams

Employers can oversee the implementation of improved methods for collecting and analyzing data related to neurodiversity initiatives. Companies may be able to measure the impact

of neurodiverse teams on various outcomes, such as productivity, innovation, retention and employee satisfaction. By gathering more comprehensive data, employers can assess the effectiveness of their strategies and refine their approaches.

3. Shaping future corporate culture

This entails the intentional integration of neurodiversity principles into the values, norms and behaviors of a company. Employers can establish a culture that values diversity and encourages all employees to contribute their unique strengths by promoting acceptance, understanding and the celebration of neurological differences. Ultimately, this fosters a more inclusive and dynamic workplace environment.

Though the neurodiversity movement is relatively young, it deserves to be top-of-mind for employers who seek to strengthen their talent pool, accelerate productivity and innovation, retain top talent, and be an inclusive, people-friendly place of work.



Strategies for building an intersectional neurodiverse organization

This report has offered a holistic analysis of neurodiversity in the workplace: recognizing it in DEIB initiatives, assessing its significance and discussing its future. We can conclude that intersectional representation of neurodiverse individuals is critical to the success of future generations of working professionals (as well as being good for business). To ensure this success, we must address how modern workplaces can build intersectional, neuroinclusive organizations.

Understanding the drawbacks of current strategies is key to building these environments. Intersectionality is a crucial aspect of neurodivergence, and too many workplaces lack this higher level of understanding — only 54% of workers say their organization pays the right amount of attention to increasing DEIB.¹⁴ Faith Saenz, CEO and founder of NeuroTalent Consulting, identifies as a nonwhite, cisgender female — and happens to have a clinical diagnosis for autism. Described as having an “invisible disability,” Faith reflects on the narrow view of neurodiversity in the workplace. “Far too many organizations assume that neurodivergent individuals fall into one or two categories, while neurodiversity can, and often does, look much different,” she says.

While many large corporations have increased their neuroinclusivity efforts,¹⁵ they may lack awareness of intersectionality for neurodiversity. Self-reported neurodivergence, diagnostic disparities and the challenge of disclosure for minority neurodivergent individuals create barriers that have become commonplace. Therein lies the challenge: How can these strategies be reoriented to promote intersectional neuroinclusivity?

The guiding principle for building an intersectional and neuroinclusive organization is rooted in fostering a culture of belonging that recognizes that everyone works differently. Expert analysis suggests that strategies for building an intersectional neuroinclusive organization can be grouped into three categories:

- Redesigning communication strategies and expectations
- Gathering and amplifying diverse perspectives
- Utilizing data-driven approaches

Redesigning communication strategies and expectations

Creating an inclusive environment through realigned communication expectations is one approach to building an intersectional, neuroinclusive workplace. First, workplaces can provide customized communication. This begins with the acknowledgement of different work styles, preferences on how information is absorbed and shared, organizational habits, and problem-solving skills. From there, workplaces should put measures in place for their employees to share how they best communicate. This mitigates bias against neurodiverse individuals and allows all employees to participate. It’s a small change with a big impact.

Next, workplaces should prioritize trust-building and continuity in their communication. Creating lasting change in a workplace is contingent on aligning values, and neuroinclusivity initiatives cannot just be supported by HR and DEIB teams. They should be communicated to every team within a company, at all levels of seniority. When DEIB goals and strategic priorities are aligned across all levels of leadership, organizations succeed.¹⁶

Gathering and amplifying diverse perspectives

When organizations face challenges while creating neuroinclusive workplaces, it's often due to misinformation, lack of resources or ineffective diversity efforts. If modern workplaces can support intersectional diversity by gathering and amplifying diverse perspectives, inclusivity can be fostered and embedded into company culture. This involves creating intersectional employee resource groups (ERGs) and educational resources to promote nonperformative diversity — where individuals are hired not just for their identity, but for what they'll contribute to the organization.

Utilizing data-driven approaches

Data-driven approaches keep companies accountable for their intersectional neuroinclusivity efforts and support their success. These approaches are rooted in stratifying data, addressing disclosure challenges by differentiating between anonymity and confidentiality, and understanding the importance of setting measurable goals and reporting on them. Continuous evaluation of neuroinclusivity activities, and iterations of policies and programs, will lead to better success of these efforts.

In closing

The path to creating intersectional neurodiverse workplaces is a challenging one. It demands organizations to “embrace an alternative philosophy, one that calls on managers to do the hard work of fitting irregular puzzle pieces together.”¹⁷ Creating intersectional, neuroinclusive workplaces requires a new line of thinking, but developing teams with wide ranges of identities and skill sets will offer companies considerable benefits to productivity and innovation — and real innovation comes “from parts of us that we don't all share.”¹⁸



Take action

Inclusive policies, programs and culture can be beneficial for all employees, so universal accessibility is an important facet of these practices. It's critical to approach an inclusive culture by providing support for all employees rather than requiring individuals to be the ones who have to secure accommodations.

Here's a non-exhaustive list of actions based on recommended practices from experts in the field that employers could consider when creating more inclusive workplaces for neurodivergent employees.

- Allow for communication, inquiry, discussion and disagreement. Policies and programs that affect employees should be co-designed with employees. Start from the idea of “universal design” — what can be used by the largest number of people with the least amount of friction — and work from there.
- Continuously take stock of which voices aren't at the table, and rectify that by bringing them to the table. Consistently evaluate policies and programs put in place. Be flexible about making adjustments, and keep the long-term sustainability of neuroinclusive policies and programs as the ultimate objective.
- Openly model inclusivity at leadership levels, including having neurodivergent individuals in positions of leadership and power.
- Establish a recruitment process that's open, flexible and accommodating to interviewees and interview training for managers (one of the best first questions to ask can be, “Are you comfortable?”). Create accommodations based on trust across multiple levels of the organization, from direct managers, to HR support, to peers, to leadership.
- Allow for flexibility in working hours and dress code, work-from-home options, and no employee surveillance.



About the experts

While organizations may be at the beginning of their journey toward a neuroinclusive workplace, experts in the field have studied and worked with early adopters of a more neuroinclusive philosophy. The following experts were consulted for this report. To learn more about them and their work, search for them online.

Morénike Giwa Onaiwu

Morénike Giwa Onaiwu, Ph.D., is a global human rights and disability justice social scientist/activist, author and educator, with both lived and learned expertise. Her work focuses on participatory research, meaningful community involvement, intersectionality and accessibility. A recognized leader and content expert in various collaborative endeavors, Morénike is the founder and principal operator of Advocacy Without Borders, a nonprofit initiative offering lectures, advocacy, research and related projects, as well as diversity, equity and inclusion training.

Faith Saenz

Faith Saenz is the founder of NeuroTalent Consulting, a company whose mission is to bridge the gap in communication between neurotypical hiring teams and autistic talent. As head consultant, she works hands-on with companies and talent acquisition teams, providing interview training to recruiters and hiring managers and consulting on inclusive changes that can be made to their hiring processes. Additionally, Faith works as an autism educator and offers her speaking services to companies and programs.

Tumi Sotire

Tumi Sotire is an award-winning speaker, advocate, consultant and esteemed academic with expertise in medical science, health economics and evidence synthesis. He holds influential positions on several boards, including The Diverse Creative CIC, Neurodiversity in Business Noetic and the Centre for Neurodiversity at Work. He has also been featured in *Forbes* magazine. All these roles highlight his exceptional leadership and advocacy as “The Black Dyspraxic.”

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