

Article

Neurodiversity, Equity, and Inclusion in MNCs

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Neurodiversity is likely present as an ‘invisible’ inequality in most, if not all, multinational corporations (MNCs). The unique characteristics and cultural sensitivities of global operating environments challenge MNCs’ efforts to promote awareness and embed neurodiversity into their cross-border diversity, equity, and inclusion agendas. Drawing from both practitioner and academic sources, we speak to MNCs and their international human resource management leaders by providing concrete guidance for navigating the fostering and advancing of their neurodiversity initiatives, notwithstanding the operating environment. Through our proposed initiatives the strengths and perspectives of neurodivergent employees can be successfully harnessed, leading to improved effectiveness and performance for MNCs.

INTRODUCTION

Did you know that 15–20% of the global population is neurodivergent (Doyle, 2020)? Yet neurodiversity receives far less attention than other diversities within the diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) agendas of multinational corporations (MNCs). In this article, we offer insights into how MNCs can be more strategic with neurodiversity inclusion initiatives. We speak to MNCs and their international human resource management (IHRM) leaders who carry the responsibility of ensuring an inclusive environment that enables all employees to thrive and contribute to the bottom line (Ely & Thomas, 2020). The success of any push for neurodiversity to be included in the conversation, however, must go beyond the traditional focus of MNCs on cultural diversity initiatives to recognize the importance and value of investing in other diversity efforts. We offer guidance for how MNCs can accomplish this in relation to neurodiversity.

NEURODIVERSITY

Neurodiversity is the idea that neurological differences that have traditionally been considered atypical are normal variations of the human genome – essentially, neurodivergent individuals are simply differently abled. While it includes a range of conditions (see [Figure 1](#)), such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia, and Tourette syndrome, most people associate neurodiversity with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). An

individual who is diagnosed or self-identifies with one of these conditions is neurodivergent. Within the DEI domain, neurodiversity is an ‘invisible’ inequality because it refers to normal variations among individuals’ sociability, attention, learning and other neurological functions that are not always easy to observe.

We note that the capabilities and challenges of neurodivergent individuals can significantly vary to the extent that the spectrum includes those who are non-verbal and need fulltime support, and those who are considered highly skilled or gifted. The spectrum is not a linear continuum and is rather, and more accurately, considered as a constellation. This means that while neurodivergent individuals with different conditions may have different capabilities, those with the same condition may also possess differing capabilities. In addition, although neurodivergent individuals experience a varying array of challenges, in most cases when their needs are accommodated for, they can leverage their capabilities and meaningfully contribute to organizations (Austin & Pisano, 2017).

In this article, we focus on neurodiversity within the context of competitive employment, where neurologically atypical persons utilize their capabilities to effectively compete in the job market. These individuals may have a range of conditions, both diagnosed and undiagnosed, that bestow them with unique and valuable skillsets. Consistent with Baron-Cohen’s (2017) definition, these individuals may have a disability requiring support or simply a difference that “does not necessarily affect functioning or well-being” (p. 746). Successfully supporting neurodivergent employees within MNCs means potentially gaining access

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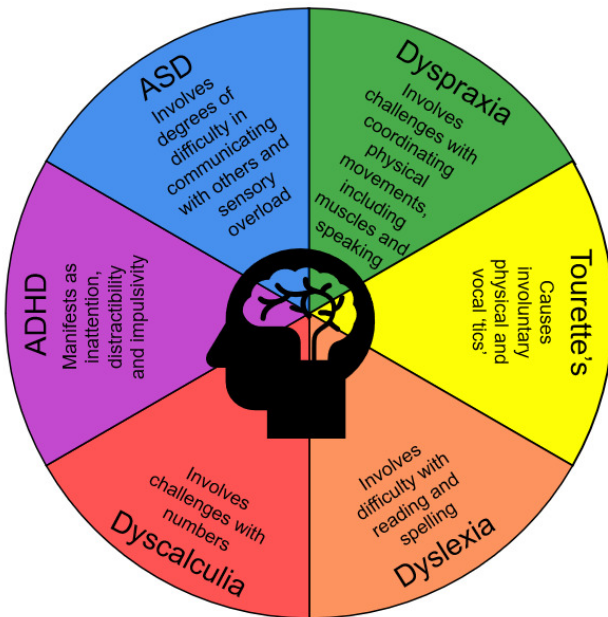


Figure 1. Some of the conditions associated with the term neurodiversity.

to a variety of skills, including but not limited to unwavering focus and pattern recognition capabilities, excellent analytical and problem-solving abilities, and memory and mathematical skills. To date, only a handful of organizations worldwide embrace this [neuro]diversity but they are reaping incredible benefits from doing so. For example, neurodivergent employees at SAP made a technical fix that saved \$40 million (Austin & Pisano, 2017), and JP Morgan Chase found their neurodivergent employees to be 48% faster and 92% more productive than their neurotypical employees (Pettersson, 2019).

Many MNCs are missing out on the value that increased neurodiversity can bring, which is evidenced by the continually high neurodiversity un- and under-employment rates (Moeller, Ott, & Russo, 2021). While there are few statistics available, Australia reports that unemployment rates among autistic individuals are higher than any other disability (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2019), in the UK 80% of neurodivergent individuals are seeking employment but only 22% have managed to find it (The National Autistic Society, 2021), and in a longitudinal study in the US only 14% of neurodivergent participants obtained paid employment (Roux, Rast, Anderson, & Shattuck, 2017). Within the context of competitive employment, high unemployment is mainly due to the use of traditional recruitment processes that limit the ability of neurodivergent candidates to showcase their strengths, and the perception that some of their behaviors are counter to what is expected, especially during an interview (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Additionally, neurodivergent individuals may not fit the mold of what many consider to be an 'ideal employee' – someone with the ability to communicate well, network, and demonstrate high emotional intelligence, and thus, they often miss out on opportunities to gain employment. So, MNCs must do more than just tweak existing practices; they need to rethink and

challenge their perception of what a successful employee looks like and move beyond conforming to standardized employee management approaches (Austin & Pisano, 2017).

THE CHALLENGE OF NEURODIVERSITY INCLUSION IN MNCs

Developing neurodiversity initiatives can be a challenge for MNCs because of the vast societal contexts they operate within and associated expectations regarding the inclusion of neurodivergent individuals. Neurodiversity diagnoses and acceptance in westernized countries is often incongruent to the paradigms of other, non-western countries. For example, in South Korea, autism is considered as a 'genetic taint' by some, and if diagnosed, diminishes the marriage prospects of the individual and others within their family. Misdiagnosis can also be common in some Asian and African communities. This can result from, for example, the difficulty with making eye contact (exhibited by some people with autism) being interpreted as being respectful in such cultures, while in the western context it would more likely be considered as rude and would raise a red flag. As such, students of Asian heritage in the UK have been reported to be half as likely to be identified with ASD as Anglo-Saxon British pupils (Green, 2020). Meanwhile, there are some cultures that still consider neurodivergent individuals as 'abnormal' and are yet to accept that neurodiversity is not a mental health disorder.

Clearly, the difficulties MNCs face given the gamut of cultural interpretations is challenging at best. MNCs' efforts to progress neurodiversity awareness and develop culturally appropriate initiatives are consequently hindered by the cultural readiness of countries. But MNCs can also be agents of change (Kwok & Tadesse, 2006), and by implementing neurodiversity initiatives and extending these across their subsidiary network they can stimulate cultural shifts that effect social change (Raskovic, 2021).

To assist MNCs, we provide tips, drawn from practitioner and academic sources, for starting and maturing neurodiversity initiatives, while also cautioning the need for the implementation to be in ways that consider the cultural sensitivities of the country of operation. Although many of the recommendations we put forward may appear consistent with a domestic firm's DEI program, we evidence their relevancy and applicability to international organizations through examples from a variety of MNCs. In addition to cultural sensitivities, accommodating neurodiversity in international organizations comes with an additional layer of complexity regarding regulatory and institutional differences. While in some locations (US, UK, Australia, and European nations) governments have begun gathering statistical data about neurodiversity and there are now organizations available to support neurodivergent individuals, in many others such individuals are still shrouded due to ignorance and stigmatization. Utilizing the guidance that we outline, MNCs will not only be able to increase neurodiversity within their organizations but will also be able to harness the strengths and perspectives that neurodivergent

employees bring to improve effectiveness and performance (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Ely & Thomas, 2020).

NEURODIVERSITY INITIATIVES: GETTING STARTED AND MATURING

When individuals are unaware of what neurodiversity is and the challenges neurodivergent individuals face, it can lead to stigmatization. In the workplace, the behaviors of neurodivergent employees are often seen as incongruent and disruptive by neurotypical individuals. Therefore, developing awareness is critical to the overall success of any neurodiversity-focused DEI program. However, MNCs need to go further than simply spreading awareness; action is required. There are several initiatives MNCs can implement to encourage, accommodate, and champion neurodiversity in the workplace, and we outline some of these below. These initiatives do not need to be executed in the exact order outlined here. There may be some initiatives that MNCs find are easier to implement or that will work particularly well in their specific context, and so it may be worthwhile to focus on these first.

FIVE TIPS FOR MNCs AND THEIR IHRM LEADERS TO KICKSTART THEIR NEURODIVERSITY INCLUSION INITIATIVES

If an MNC is just starting out on its neurodiversity journey, one of the first things to focus on is establishing global neurodiversity goals and a strategy within the context of the wider strategic workforce plan. The neurodiversity strategy needs to be clearly communicated to all the leaders in the MNC, as leadership buy-in is paramount for any diversity program. Also, seeking executive sponsorship of neurodiversity initiatives at the global and subsidiary levels will highlight the importance of the topic and assist with driving change throughout the organization. One way to achieve this is through appointing neurodiversity champions or executive sponsors, who in many cases may be motivated by personal connections to neurodiversity. Generating awareness and interest among all MNC employees regarding neurodiversity and its benefits is also important and can be achieved by running information sessions, distributing articles, and sharing stories around the topic.

We suggest trialing some neurodiversity initiatives in one subsidiary location first and then, after incorporating learnings, rolling them out to other locations. A detailed neurodiversity strategy for each individual subsidiary needs to be implemented at the local level to ensure cultural sensitivities are catered for. Given the cultural sensitivity challenges around neurodiversity, partnering with a neurodiversity adviser at the country or subsidiary level, to ensure support and accommodations address both environmental and interpersonal needs in a culturally appropriate way, is strongly encouraged. An expert in neurodiversity in the workplace can not only help to create the right work environment but may also advise on the most appropriate way forward in line with local procedures and expectations. For example, Avande Asia in Singapore, in partnership with a local neurodiversity specialist, increased their recruitment

of neurodivergent individuals and found that such employees were extremely detail oriented, provided exceptional value, and had organizational and client impact (Yeoh & Yip, 2021).

Finally, we recommend speaking with the leaders of MNCs that are embracing neurodiversity in their workplaces to understand how their neurodiversity initiatives were established, and what worked well and what was challenging. Learning from the experiences of MNCs that have achieved positive organizational outcomes from implementing neurodiversity initiatives or programs, such as SAP, EY, HPE, Ford, Microsoft, and others, is invaluable and can potentially save time and effort (Austin & Pisano, 2017).

FIVE TIPS FOR MNCs AND THEIR IHRM LEADERS TO MATURE THEIR NEURODIVERSITY INITIATIVES

Understanding and assessing the skills required for achieving future strategic goals at both the global and subsidiary levels is a key step for advancing your neurodiversity initiatives to the next level. We recommend focusing on future skillset needs and setting a strategy to deliver on these, which should include appropriately formulated neurodiversity recruitment approaches at both the headquarter and subsidiary levels. Traditional recruitment strategies will not suffice because they do not allow neurodivergent candidates to demonstrate their capabilities. To attract and acquire neurodivergent employees, MNCs are instead strongly encouraged to adopt a strengths-based approach to recruitment that allows candidates to engage in practical activities to effectively demonstrate their capabilities. For example, in Australia and New Zealand, SAP tailors its recruitment practices to allow neurodivergent candidates to show their strengths in practical ways and this has increased the presence of neurodiversity within the organization (Austin & Pisano, 2017).

Training both managers and colleagues of neurodivergent employees so that they can provide the necessary support is vital. It should include unconscious bias training, as well as neurodiversity specific training that will help develop awareness and understanding in a culturally sensitive way. In addition, utilizing standard global job descriptions across the MNC should be avoided. Instead, offering flexibility through job crafting/carving that allows for position descriptions to be amended locally to fit the individual strengths of neurodivergent employees is recommended. Performance management should also be adjusted to accommodate neurodiversity and counter any inherent biases. MNC career paths should be personalized to address short- and long-term career goals that encourage and allow for all employees to reach their potential. For example, international assignments need to be carefully considered and managed, given that the acceptance and support available to neurodivergent employees may vary across countries and can impact the success of assignments. Therefore, making the successful completion of an international assignment a requirement for progression should be carefully considered so as not to unintentionally disadvantage neurodivergent employees. Providing a variety of ways to achieve progression expectations or equivalent substitutions that better

suit the strengths of neurodivergent employees is recommended.

Lastly, and most importantly, to improve retention, MNCs must ensure the ongoing inclusion of the perspectives of neurodivergent employees. This means MNCs must frequently be encouraged to reassess the support, development, and accommodations of neurodivergent candidates and employees from *their* perspective and ensure both interpersonal and environmental needs are addressed at the local subsidiary level. This will require collecting information and feedback from current neurodivergent employees and regularly reviewing the initiatives that are recommended by neurodiversity support organizations such as the international firm Specialisterne, or more locally focused organizations such as EXPANDability and the Arc in the US, EnAble in India, and Untapped and Aspect in Australia. The input of neurodivergent individuals in this process is key, after all, diversity without inclusion is an illusion!

CONCLUSION

In summary, overcoming neurodivergent un- and underemployment has the potential to greatly benefit MNCs. As neurodiversity awareness increases, more MNCs will promote, accommodate, and champion neurodiversity in the workplace. Consequently, neurodivergent individuals will be afforded more opportunities to use their strengths in meaningful ways that positively contribute to the success of their organizations. It is also worth mentioning that the actions taken to accommodate neurodivergent employees often spill over to the benefit of all employees (Austin & Pisano, 2017). However, in order to achieve this MNCs must move beyond token gestures to implementing concrete initiatives that encourage and support neurodiversity in the workplace. MNCs do not need a perfect plan, they just need to get started.

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