

NEURODIVERSITY @ WORK PLAYBOOK

Employee Engagement
and Growth Series

ISSUE #4

Neuroinclusive Career Advancement

Career development and advancement are basic expectations of any employee. Development opportunities not only advance individual employees, they also build new competencies for organizations to leverage. Organizations that invest in employee development and have productive and clear pathways to advancement experience higher retention, morale, engagement, and overall productivity. These companies, therefore, experience higher profitability and grow a desirable brand that attracts and retains top talent.

For neurodivergent employees, it can be particularly difficult to navigate the complex organizational structures, networks, and resources in order to identify and secure development opportunities. This challenge can be especially burdensome on their morale and well-being, as they may face additional barriers and challenges in the process. Neurodivergent individuals may have unique needs and perspectives, and may require accommodations or support in order to access development opportunities. When neurodivergent employees are unable to access development opportunities, this can have a negative impact on their motivation, job satisfaction, and overall well-being. It is important for organizations to recognize the challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals and to create inclusive and supportive environments that promote equal access to development opportunities for all employees.

Why is career advancement challenging for many neurodivergent employees?

Development and advancement opportunities and pathways can be complex and not always clear in organizations. Employees are often expected to decode expectations, evaluation criteria, resources, and policies to identify their advancement options. Employees also often have to engage in significant networking, socializing, impression management, and in some cases politicking to identify and be considered for available advancement and development opportunities.

For many neurodivergent people, these activities distract from work and drain the individual's cognitive, emotional, and social energy. There are several reasons for this:

- Organizations are complex, and weaving through the details of written policies and unwritten rules, social hierarchies, and norms is especially challenging and may seem illogical to a neurodivergent person. This makes it more difficult for them to identify and proactively seek opportunities.
- Many advancement opportunities, especially leadership opportunities, overemphasize normative social skills. These requirements unjustly disadvantage neurodivergent candidates and place significant pressure on them to mask, leading to negative health outcomes.
- For many neurodivergent individuals who have experienced lower confidence in their abilities due to societal bias and rejection, advancement opportunities may seem out of reach even though they are ready for them.
- Due to the limited visible representation of neurodivergent people in leadership, many neurodivergent people believe these opportunities are out of reach.
- For many neurodivergent people who struggle to secure employment, their focus remains on their job performance and not on social capital building that leads to opportunities.
- Many neurodivergent employees are less prone to taking risks in general, taking on complex assignments that would advance their careers, and/or applying for promotions for fear of losing their job.

NEUROINCLUSIVE CAREER ADVANCEMENT CHECKLIST

- ✓ Reframe the context of development and advancement to be neuroinclusive and not biased in normative ways.
- ✓ Build the capacity of human resources, human capital, and managers for neuroinclusive development and advancement.
- ✓ Identify and address biased criteria and structures for advancement.
- ✓ Make resources related to advancement explicit and discoverable in mainstream processes
- ✓ Make development and advancement key responsibilities of the manager.

How do we support career development strategies for neurodivergent employees?

Organizations are responsible for the growth and development of all employees. Career development and advancement opportunities, therefore, should be equally available to all employees based on job-relevant skills and the employee's interests. Employees' perceptions of equitable access to developmental opportunities and fairness in job-relevant criteria affect their morale, engagement, and productivity.

To be a neuroinclusive organization, it is important then to make mainstream organizational development and advancement processes and resources discoverable by and conducive to the needs of neurodivergent employees. Perhaps most importantly, the criteria for advancement should be made explicit and relevant to the job and not as heavily reliant on social networking and politicking. Below are key practices to consider to operationalize this ideal:

1 Rethink traditional definitions of advancement and reframe advancement from a neurodivergent lens.

- Define holistic, meaningful reward and advancement criteria aligned with organizational values and mission.
- Consider goal attainment for the individual employee instead of normative metrics of advancement and retention built on neurotypical preferences.
- Make balanced organizational health and representation of the population central to your KPIs, informed by neurodivergent employees.

2 Assess existing advancement processes and criteria to identify and address barriers.

3 Provide a broad set of tools and activities to support individual and team growth.

4 Personalize the discovery and development of skills and potential for all employees in neuroinclusive ways.

- Use a strength-based approach to assessment and advancement.
- Use affirmation and encouragement for development and advancement, keeping in mind that many neurodivergent employees have been overlooked and experienced discrimination.
- Build the capacity of your human resources, managers, ERGs, and human capital to emphasize strength-based development and advancement.
- Provide self-assessment and development workshops.
- Provide job exploration opportunities such as shadowing and rotational programs.
- Promote credentials achieved and validate individual learning and accomplishments in an equitable way using team and organizational tools.

5 Normalize the support for career advancement as key to the manager's role.

6 Be transparent about opportunities available.

- Make all openings open and advertised to all employees.
- Make job requirements for such opportunities explicit and job-relevant.
- Think through how you might explain various career pathways using multiple interactive media that build on employee interests and skills in ways they understand.

7 Leverage neurodiversity program leads and regular events to promote holistic advancement.

- Leverage regular check-ins with hiring managers and neurodivergent employees to track development or address challenges.
- Maintain open communication to provide support and gain context to the employee's progress.
- Highlight achievements by neurodivergent hires (with their permission of course) to illustrate the possibilities and reinforce their value and contributions, encouraging other neurodivergent employees.

How can managers support neurodivergent employees through career advancement?

Managers are the most critical enablers of neuroinclusion. They not only set the tone for inclusive teams and support individual performance, but they also provide the affirmation and feedback necessary for each employee to grow. For neurodivergent employees, an effective manager ensures the employee is clear about their current role and understands how they can continue to evolve and grow within that role as well as within their team. Additionally, an effective manager creates an environment that is conducive to an employee's intellectual, mental, and physical well-being. This will ultimately lead to improved employee satisfaction and retention.

Neuroinclusive managers who utilize the following strategies will see all their employees, neurotypical and neurodivergent alike, benefit.

- ✓ They are consistently clear and transparent with individual employees about their role and priorities.
- ✓ They adopt a collaborative process in creating and working toward employee priorities.
- ✓ They invest time in getting to know their employees.
- ✓ They design work environments and processes that enable their employees to be effective at their job and maintain their well-being.
- ✓ They build on the employee's strengths and provide them with the support that they need to develop in areas that require improvement.
- ✓ They recognize their employee's contribution and growth in meaningful ways while maintaining a cohesive team spirit.
- ✓ They see employee development as a key part of their role and dedicate time to it regularly beyond the formal review.
- ✓ They follow their employee's lead with regard to their advancement goals.
- ✓ They do not assume their employee's interests or priorities are static — they check in and provide opportunities to be declined.
- ✓ They do not assume their employees' potential, untapped strengths, goals, barriers, or limitations.
- ✓ They provide affirming and constructive feedback for employees.
- ✓ They seek to understand the employee's point of view or rationale before judgment or response.
- ✓ They provide actionable items for corrective performance or attaining new behaviors or skills, such as:
 - Providing talking points relevant to certain topics/events.
 - Sharing do's and don'ts, especially in professional networking.
 - Demonstrating skills and modeling desired outcomes.
- ✓ They help employees build connections beyond the team.
- ✓ They provide stretch assignments beyond the employee's role to help their employee attain a desired promotion.
- ✓ They ask for help!

How do you measure and track retention and advancement?

There is no easy or single solution to track retention or advancement data for neurodivergent employees in organizations. While some employees may disclose their neurodivergent identity formally to HR, many may not disclose their identity for many reasons, including but not limited to fear of stigma.

When neurodivergent identity data is available, special care

should be given to how such data is used and the potential impact on the employees involved. Organizations must pay special care as to how neurodivergent employees want their data to be used over their tenure at the organization. This is an area that requires much more deliberation in partnership with neurodivergent employees.

TRACKING STRATEGIES

Consider the following ways to lay the foundation to track advancement:

- ✓ Assess the extent to which and how well your HR systems provide an opportunity to gain holistic insights related to employees' identities and advancement.
- ✓ Be intentional in how identity data is collected and used to support employees while maintaining their privacy.
- ✓ Get feedback from your neurodivergent employees and ERGs about how advancement may be tracked.
- ✓ Make sure you give neurodivergent employees agency over their data and ensure that their identifying data is protected
- ✓ Use responsible people analytics practices to identify retention and advancement as KPIs when possible.
- ✓ Consider utilizing periodic surveys and feedback forums to get insight related to advancement successes and how neurodivergent employees consider their advancement options to get a holistic picture of the employee experience.

Neuroinclusive career advancement

- Integrate the advancement strategy for neurodivergent employees into the way you do business, not the exception.
- Support and hold managers accountable for their direct reports' advancement..
- Develop a growth mindset in managers.
- Redefine advancement by listening to the employee's needs and preferences. Focus on goal attainment and avoid an up-or-out mentality.
- Create consistency and equity in the treatment of everyone when leveraging individualized support.
- Recognize change management during career advancement.
- Review current processes for development to identify and address barriers.

Resources

This brief only touches the surface related to best practices to support career advancement of neurodivergent employees. Below are some additional resources that will help you dive deeper into the topic.

In this report, a Deloitte team provides great insights on reframing career development and advancement for neuroinclusion. Pay particular attention to their section on tailored career journeys:

<https://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/insights/topics/talent/neurodiversity-in-the-workplace.html>

For Career Development short guide prepared by UC Berkley's People and Culture, provides a nice overview of the role of the manager in career development. These general practices written for all employees contains essential best practices:

<https://hr.berkeley.edu/hr-network/central-guide-managing-hr/managing-hr/managing-successfully/development/career>

About this series

The Neurodiversity @ Work Playbook: Employee Engagement and Growth Series is the product of a series of focus groups led by Dr. Hala Annabi, an associate professor at the University of Washington Information School. Dr. Annabi facilitated discussion in five focus groups, including participants from the Neurodiversity at Work Employer Roundtable, addressing best practices related to five key areas of opportunity represented in these briefs. The facilitators distilled best practices and developed these guides for other organizations to use to continue to advance neurodiversity employment with input from focus group participants.

HOW TO CITE THIS GUIDE: Annabi, H. (2023) Neurodiversity at Work Playbook: Employee Engagement & Growth Series. Seattle, WA: ACCESS-IT, The Information School, University of Washington, 2023.

CONTRIBUTORS: Neurodiversity at Work Employer Roundtable contributors include: Auticon, Charles Schwab, Dell Technologies, Deloitte, Google, HP Inc., Integrate Autism Employment Advisors, Iterators LLC, John's Crazy Socks, JPMC, Mentra, Microsoft, Neurodiversity in the Workplace, Optum/UnitedHealth Group, Pfizer, Potentia, SAP, Thermo Fisher Scientific, U.S. Bank, Ultranaughts Inc., and Walgreens.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS: We express our appreciation to Doug Parry and Tara Lanphar for their support for this project.

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