

NEURODIVERSITY @ WORK PLAYBOOK

Employee Engagement
and Growth Series

ISSUE #1

Cultivating Neuroinclusive Culture

Peter Drucker once said, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." Any strategy for neurodiversity hiring is doomed to fail if the culture is not neuroinclusive.

What do we mean by neuroinclusive culture?

A neuroinclusive culture refers to an organizational culture that is consistent with the neurodiversity movement, which emphasizes that neurotypes are important human variations valuable to the organization's sustainability. A neuroinclusive organization holds the belief that a neurodiverse workforce (including neurodivergent and neurotypical people) is essential to address the complexity of the world's challenges and needs. Furthermore, including neurodivergent people equitably in forms conducive to their ways of being is critical to the overall success of their organization and the well-being of all employees.

These beliefs are operationalized and observable in policies, messaging, types of behaviors accepted and enforced, promotion of leaders who lead with empathy, and employee hiring and development practices that are rid of neurotypical bias, among other things. Neuroinclusion is an important dimension of diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts that have long been ignored in organizations considering that 1 in 7 people are neurodivergent.

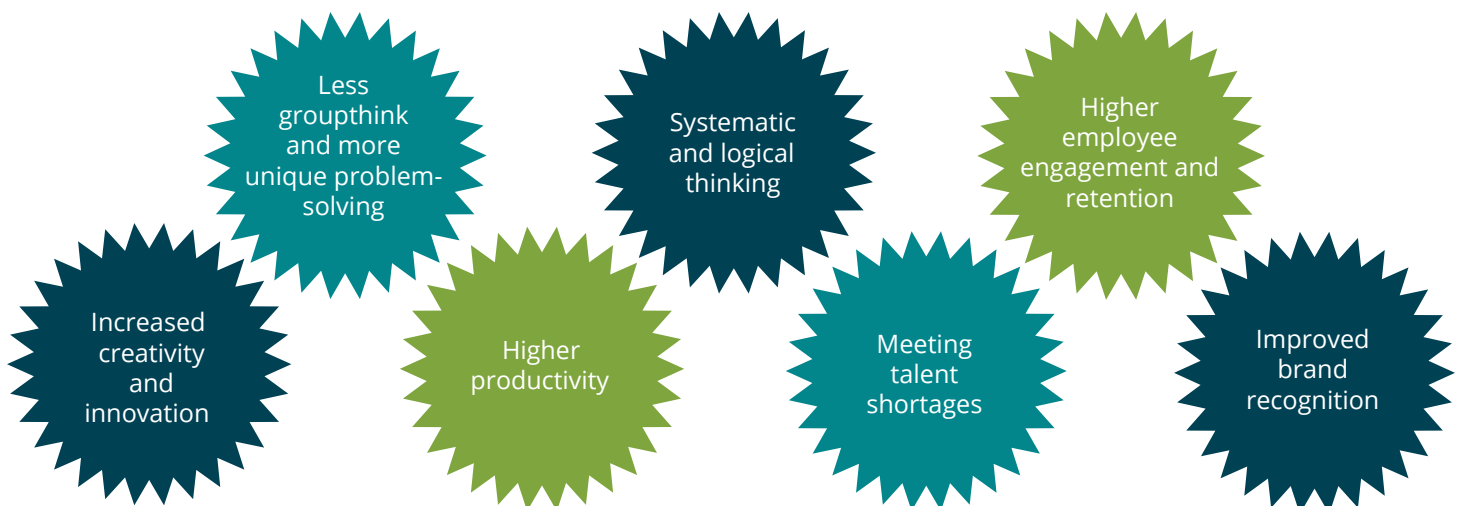
Why neuroinclusion matters

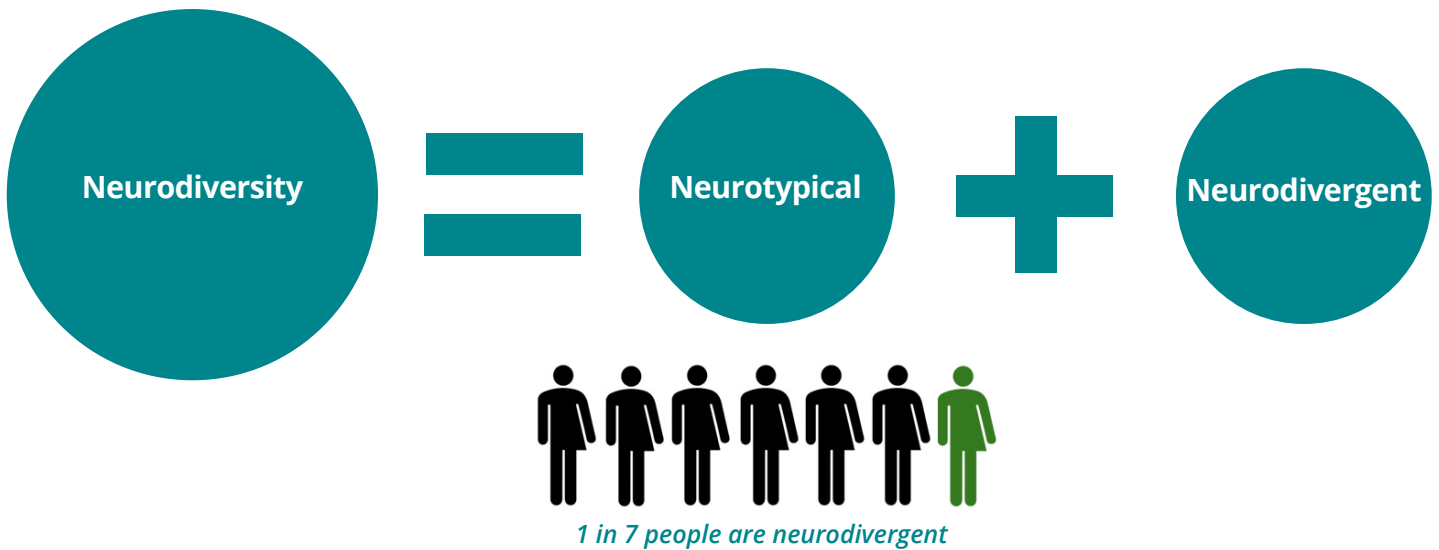
There is sufficient evidence that an inclusive organizational culture is essential for productivity and innovation. True inclusion means embracing the uniqueness of individuals rather than conformance. In the last decade, private and public organizations have turned their attention to neurodivergent people in order to meet their workforce needs.

While neurodivergent people have long been key contributors to their organizations when employed, they have taken on the burden of assimilating into the environment rather than bringing their unique selves to enrich that environment.

Assimilating to the environment, often referred to as masking, has negative health and cognitive impacts on a person, reducing their capacity to contribute authentically. When neurodivergent employees mask, they hide their unique talents, which makes their talents inaccessible to the organization.

Because of this, there is an increased need for creating workplaces inclusive of the unique talents, needs, and different ways of being of neurodivergent people in the workplace. Only when organizations embrace neurodiversity and create neuroinclusive cultures are they able to tap into the unique perspectives, skills, and talents of neurodivergent employees, which leads to:





NEUROINCLUSIVE CULTURE CHECKLIST

- ✓ Ground neuroinclusion in your existing diversity, equity and inclusion strategy.
- ✓ Leverage executives to reinforce neuroinclusion.
- ✓ Build neuroinclusion into your company narratives.
- ✓ Build the capacity of your managers.
- ✓ Refine your structures and processes to be neuroinclusive.
- ✓ Train all employees to be neuroinclusive.
- ✓ Partner with and get feedback from your neurodivergent employees to shape your neuroinclusive culture.

How do we cultivate and reinforce a neuroinclusive culture?

Cultivating a neuroinclusive culture takes time, investment, deliberate action, and self-assessment. It begins with recognizing that our workplaces are designed to meet the needs and preferences of dominant identities. This presents explicit and implicit barriers for neurodivergent people, who may behave and work differently than normative expectation. For organizations to truly provide equal opportunities for neurodivergent people,

they must cultivate a culture of inclusion that recognizes, in meaningful ways, that neurodivergent people's ways of being are valuable to the organization. Neuroinclusive organizations provide the accommodations and resources necessary to enable success.

The following are key actions to cultivating a neuroinclusive culture.

1. Be clear on why neuroinclusion matters to your organization.

- Reinforce neuroinclusion values and expectations through an explicit communication strategy and executive storytelling.
- Articulate what a neuroinclusive culture looks like and how it adds cultural and strategic value to the organization.
- Emphasize that a neuroinclusive culture benefits all employees.

2. Secure and make public the executive support for neuroinclusion.

- Ensure ongoing executive engagement in partnership with the neurodiversity community.
- Encourage and communicate executive use of flexible arrangements and supports to normalize these benefits to all employees at every level.

3. Leverage the strengths of your current organizational culture.

- Identify and reinforce values and norms that align with the neurodiversity principles of inclusion, especially strength-based perspective and curiosity toward differences.
- Demonstrate how neuroinclusion is a form of such values and further strengthens them.

4. Build capacity of your organization to operationalize neuroinclusion in work practices.

- Operationalize neuroinclusion in the organization's structure and control systems including recruitment and hiring practices, annual reviews, and promotions.
- Demonstrate how neuroinclusion is a form of such values and further strengthens them.
- Train managers to be neuroinclusive and reward them.
- Educate, empower, and reward all employees for neuroinclusion.
- Partner with change management practitioners to leverage company strategy and emphasize the value proposition to employees to help drive cultural change.
- Make accommodations available and discoverable to meet individual needs (e.g., sensory, communication, learning, work environment, and executive function needs) so everyone can perform at their best.

5. Follow your neurodistinct employees' lead.

- Create feedback channels for neurodivergent employees to identify areas for improvement and design solutions conducive to them and representative of their needs and ideas.
- Collaborate with and amplify Employee Resource Groups' (ERGs) values, advocacy efforts, and existing activities to amplify values of neuroinclusion.
- Provide advocacy and support training for neurodivergent employees so they are more likely to influence the organization's culture.

6. Identify and address norms and practices counter to neuroinclusion.

- Assess cultural values and norms and identify those in conflict with neuroinclusion.
- Reframe problematic values and norms to ground them in neuroinclusion.
- Stress humility and provide safe spaces for employees at all levels to question key assumptions rooted in neurotypical expectations about the nature of work, forms of social interaction, types of contributions valued, and work flexibility.

Build neuroinclusion competency in employees and managers

- ✓ Design and develop training that is congruent with your organization's values and practices.
- ✓ Do not rely on a one-time-only training to reinforce inclusive and effective practices.
- ✓ Provide training on a logical and regular basis.
- ✓ Design duration and cadence that is conducive to various groups' schedules and workloads.
- ✓ Arrange topics in order of relevance and timeliness.
- ✓ Conduct training that builds a neuroinclusive culture of true acceptance and changes attitudes.
- ✓ Go beyond awareness training and offer work practice training relevant to cross-cultural communication, collaboration techniques, meeting etiquette, conflict resolution, and other teamwork in neurodiverse team skills.

Empower neurodivergent employees

- ✓ Develop and provide training relevant to advocacy.
- ✓ Provide timely training on various organizational processes and expectations (e.g., annual review training shortly before reviews are due).
- ✓ Provide training for effective collaboration and communication in neurodiverse teams. Trainings should be conducive to healthy behaviors, avoid masking, and be grounded in agency.

On raising awareness...

“Raising awareness could help to reduce some of the challenges experienced by neurodivergent employees in the workplace,” according to an industry survey conducted by Texthelp*. An example of one way to go about raising awareness is to run internal and/or external campaigns during Neurodiversity Celebration Week. In 2023, Microsoft listened to members of the neurodiversity community and focused on building an internal campaign focused in three areas:

Increasing acceptance and understanding by creating an environment where people are comfortable disclosing and empowered to talk about neurodiversity. This was done through an internal communications campaign that referred employees to a series of events, along with a website listing resources and communities available to support Microsoft employees globally.

Providing education by sharing manager resources, benefits, and accommodations related information and employee storytelling for peer-to-peer learning.

Using company messaging to celebrate the strengths of a neuroinclusive workforce and how diverse and innovative teams positively affect the company culture, working environment, and customer service. The tone throughout the campaign reinforced Microsoft’s support and care for neurodivergent individuals. In a video, employees shared why they celebrate neurodiversity.

LESSONS LEARNED

Cultivating a neuroinclusive culture

- Neuroinclusive workplaces benefit everyone.
- Integrate neuroinclusion efforts within D&I strategy.
- Avoid making neuroinclusion a separate culture.
- Language matters; emphasize inclusive and affirming language.
- Identify and partner with internal and external units and organizations that share and act on your values of inclusion.
- Recognize that cultivating neuroinclusive culture is an iterative process. Focus on making gradual progress on your agenda without getting it perfect. Maintain a growth mindset.
- Emphasize that neurodivergent people are already in your organization; support and empower them.
- Do not underestimate the importance of a holistic communication strategy.

* *New industry survey highlights state of neurodiversity and inclusivity in U.S. companies.* (2022, Sept. 13). PR Newswire. <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/new-industry-survey-highlights-state-of-neurodiversity-and-inclusivity-in-us-companies-301622425.html>

Resources

This brief only scratches the surface related to best practices to cultivate a neuroinclusive culture. Below are some additional resources that will help you dive deeper into the topic of inclusive culture.

- Judy Singer provides a critical perspective on neuroinclusion in business: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ipfSedUFki0>
- Deloitte Review offers a wonderful report on general diversity and inclusion principles: https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/insights/us/articles/4209_Diversity-and-inclusion-revolution/DI_Diversity-and-inclusion-revolution.pdf
- “Unlocking Neurodiversity Inclusion at Work” from YSC Consulting (part of Accenture) provides great perspective on leadership practices to promote neuroinclusion: <https://www.capstan.be/neurodiversity-may-be-the-next-frontier-in-discussions-around-dei-in-the-workplace/>
- <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/unlocking-neurodiversity-inclusion-work-ysc/>
- Gartner provides 10 best practices relevant to neuroinclusion in its “10 Actions to Maximize the Potential of Neurodiverse Talent” report: <https://www.gartner.com/document/4022546?ref=solrAll&refval=362938592>

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, Pfizer, Potentia Workforce, SAP, Simons Foundation, Thermo Fisher Scientific, U.S. Bank, Ultronauts Inc., UnitedHealth Group and Walgreens.

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

COPYRIGHT: ©2023 the authors. All rights reserved. The publication may be copied and disseminated without charge in part or whole as long as appropriate acknowledgment and citation are given.