

Study explores benefits of workplace neurodiversity

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Ivey Business School professor Rob Austin explores how companies are approaching the idea of neurodiversity employment for individuals who are autistic, dyslexic, hyperactive or have other neurodiverse conditions. Credit: Western News

Historically, companies have asked employees to 'trim away' their

irregularities; it's easier to fit people together if they are all perfect rectangles. But 'fit' often required employees to leave their differences at home.

"That was important in an efficiency-based economy," Ivey Business School professor Rob Austin said. "But we are starting to think it's worth doing the hard work of fitting the puzzle pieces together and asking employees to bring their whole selves to work. It's often the parts of ourselves that we don't share that are the most likely sources of new ways of thinking and innovation."

In an effort to help companies embrace a new way of identifying talent, thus leaving behind fewer people who don't fit traditional ways, Austin is studying the [best practices](#) of ahead-of-the-curve companies, particularly focused on neurodiveristy employment.

Potentially, tens of thousands of neurodiverse Canadians—think those diagnoses with autism, dyslexia, hyperactivity, etc. – want to be employed and possess talents that companies need, but they are unable to get jobs because the way symptoms of their conditions exhibit themselves in the hiring processes.

This leads to opportunities being lost when valuable potential employees are passed over because their performance in hiring situations does not match interviewer expectations, Austin said.

"A common scenario is there are a lot of places where they can't fill specific jobs, even though there are people out there who can fill the jobs and can do it very well. The problem is, they're just not surviving the conventional interview process," he continued.

However, recent neurodiversity employment programs within of SAP, Microsoft, TD Bank, Royal Bank of Canada, Ernst & Young, JP Morgan

Chase and Ford show a growing number of corporations realized the benefits of such hiring.

How these programs work is the focus of Austin's latest research project, thanks to a recent Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Insight Grant. His findings could accelerate the development of job opportunities for neurodiverse people and also reconcile conflicts about the benefits of fit-versus-diversity in organizations.

The idea of neurodiversity employment began at Specialisterne, a Danish consulting company founded in 2004 by Thorkil Sonne, who was motivated by the autism diagnosis of his third child.

Over the next several years, the company developed non-interview methods for assessing, training, and managing neurodiverse talent. Sonne established the Specialisterne Foundation to spread his [company's](#) know-how to others and persuade multinationals to start neurodiversity programs.

In 2008, Austin published the first case study in this area, about Specialisterne, in the Harvard Business Review. He has subsequently published others documenting emerging practices in other companies.

The incidence of autism spectrum disorder in the general population is 1-in-59. More than 600,000 Canadians and roughly 130 million people worldwide are affected.

Unemployment for such individuals runs as high as 80 percent, even with the European Union facing a shortage of 800,000 IT workers by 2020, according to a European Commission study. The biggest deficits are expected to be in expanding areas such as data analytics and IT services implementation, whose tasks are a good match with the abilities

of some neurodiverse people.

Nevertheless, the neurodiverse population remains a largely untapped talent pool, Austin continued.

Most managers are familiar with the advantages organizations can gain from employee diversity in background, discipline, gender, culture, and other individual qualities. The benefits from neurodiversity are similar, yet not as well-known and embraced, Austin said.

But a handful of early adopter companies "are getting a number of different kinds of benefits from these programs," he explained.

"They are filling positions they weren't able to and achieving higher levels of talents in those positions, actually recruiting some superstars on the autism spectrum," he said. "Many companies are claiming an innovation benefit with these employees, because they think differently, ask different sorts of questions and tend to trigger changes in the way companies do things."

Some neurodiverse people need workplace accommodations—think headphones to prevent auditory overstimulation, for example—or may sometimes exhibit challenging eccentricities. While they do require managers to tailor individual work settings, in many cases, they are manageable.

To realize the benefits, most companies would have to adjust their recruitment, selection and career-development policies to reflect a broader definition of talent, Austin said..

"Even though there are a lot of companies doing this now, and even though momentum is accelerating, there is a concern it is still primarily targeting what some researchers call high-functioning autistic people,"

Austin said. "The category is much larger.

"There is a lot of progress being made but there still is a whole lot more people to help."

As more companies move towards neurodiversity hiring, a variety of programming has developed. Austin wants to delve deeper. He is also interested in understanding how companies manage tension between employee fit and diversity and how neurodiversity hiring programs challenge that.

"This is a specific example of a broader movement called the diversity movement. It often argues there are business advantages to having diversity present in a business team, but there can be an uncomfortable stand-off between these two sets of ideas," Austin said. "On one hand, employee fit is a good thing, but employee differences are also a good thing."

Provided by University of Western Ontario

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