

# Neurodiversity can be a workplace strength, if we make room for it

September 8 2021, by Miriam Moeller, Dana L. Ott, Emily Russo

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Credit: Andrea Piacquadio from Pexels

Emma can recognize patterns within complex code. James can develop several different solutions when faced with complicated problems. But it is unlikely either will find a job where they can put their specialist skills

to work—or any job, actually.

Emma has dyslexia. James has been diagnosed with [attention deficit hyperactivity disorder](#). These conditions mean communicating can be a challenge, particularly in a stressful situation such as a job interview. They may also find it difficult to work in a typical office environment with noise and bright lights.

But often the significant challenge is other people assuming they will be less capable or difficult to work with.

About 15–20% of the [global population](#) are "neurodiverse." This term, coined by Australian [sociologist Judy Singer](#) in 1998, conveys [the idea](#) that the neurological differences shaping how people think and interact are natural variations to the human genome. Neurodiversity therefore isn't something to be "fixed" but understood and accommodated.

But despite this understanding, and the gains made more generally in promoting workplace diversity, prejudices keep the employment prospects for neurodiverse individuals shockingly low.

The cost is personal—denying individuals the chance to do meaningful work—as well as social, sending individuals to the dole queue. It also means workplaces are failing to benefit from highly valuable employees, and missing the opportunity to become better organizations in the process.

## What neurodiversity covers

Neurodiversity is often referred to as an 'invisible disability' and covers a range of conditions. The most common are:

- **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder** (or ADHD)

manifests as inattention, distractability and impulsivity. It affects about [4% of children and 3% of adults](#).

- **Autism Spectrum Disorder** (or ASD) typically involves degrees of difficulty in communicating with others and sensory overload. About [1% of the global population](#) is estimated to be on the spectrum, with higher rates being diagnosed among children.
- **Dyslexia** involves difficulties with reading and spelling. There is no agreed diagnosis. Estimates of its prevalence range from 3% to 20% (with [10–15%](#) commonly cited).
- **Dyspraxia** involves challenges with coordinating physical movements, including muscles for speaking. About 2% of the population are severely affected, with [6–10%](#) estimated to be affected to some degree.
- **Dyscalculia** involves challenges with numbers. It affects [up to 10%](#) of the population, with [3–6%](#) commonly cited.
- **Tourette syndrome** causes involuntary physical and vocal "tics." It affects an estimated [0.6% of the population](#).

## High unemployment

The capabilities of neurodivergent people can vary considerably from severely challenged to gifted. Some are nonverbal and fully reliant on care givers. Others have special abilities in things such as [pattern recognition, memory or mathematics](#).

Yet even those with exceptional talents find it hard to get and hold a job. While unemployment estimates are imprecise, they suggest these conditions are the least accepted in the working world.

For autistic adults aged 16–64, for example, UK statistics suggest [78% are unemployed](#). This is the highest unemployment rate of any group, compared with 48% for all disabled people and 19% for all adults.

Australian statistics put the unemployment rate for people with autism [at 34%](#). That's still more than three times the unemployment rate of 10% for people with disabilities and almost eight times the 4.6% rate for people without disabilities.

## Supporting neurodiversity at work

One problem, as Joanna Szulc and her fellow researchers at the University of Huddersfield [have put it](#), is "[management practices](#) frequently overlook the relationship between the above-average human capital of neurodivergent employees, their subjective well-being in the workplace and performance outcomes."

In other words, with understanding colleagues and a flexible work culture, neurodiverse individuals can reach their potential and be recognized as highly valuable employees.

One [case study](#) demonstrating this is professional services giant Ernst and Young, which globally employs close to 300,000 people.

In 2016 it established its first "[Neurodiversity Center of Excellence](#)" as part of a pilot program to offer jobs to neurodiverse candidates.

The company says it "considered business metrics only" in evaluating the program. It concluded the neurodiverse employees were comparable to neurotypical staff in work quality, efficiency and productivity. The bonus was "the neurodiverse employees excelled at innovation."

Australia's Department of Defence has employed high-performing autistic individuals in its [cyber security](#) work. Their strengths for this work include "a remarkable eye for detail; accuracy and consistency; a logical and analytical approach to detecting irregularities; pattern-matching skills; and a high tolerance for repetitive mental tasks."

These lessons are being taken on board by others. In July, Google's cloud computing division announced its [Autism Career Program](#), which includes training up to 500 managers "to work effectively and empathetically with autistic candidates."

We all vary naturally. By understanding and encouraging neurodiverse individuals to be fully engaged in society, we will all reap the rewards.

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