

Employer Toolkit:

Achieving Success and Support for Neurodivergent Employees

While studies have shown and companies have realized the benefits of a neurodiverse workforce, there's still work to be done to prioritize neurodivergence in diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) strategies.

Haley Moss, an attorney, neurodiversity advocate, author, speaker and thought leader, is a first-hand example of a neurodiverse person who has experienced workplaces that weren't necessarily set up for neurodiverse talent.

As a person with autism, Moss has come across employers who view people with autism as a monolith, she shared during a recent webinar titled "Hiring and Supporting Neurodivergent Workers: Strategies for Success," which was hosted by the Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability and Inclusion (EARN)."

After attending law school and getting a job in corporate law practice, Moss said she expected she would be doing research and would eventually go to court and litigate. Instead, she was doing back-room document reviews, data-related research and even running the firm's website.



"It was assumed I would be very good at technology just because of my autism," she said. "And it already set the bar that I was expected to do things outside of my job."

This stereotype is something that's affected Moss's career and is why she encourages employers to have an open mind. It's important to realize each neurodivergent person has their own strengths and weaknesses, interests and passions, just like any other person.

Make Neurodiversity Part of Your DEI Strategy

One of the biggest things that has held Moss back from applying to jobs with certain organizations is their lack of disability or neuroaffinity groups.

"I didn't apply to places that didn't value disability as diversity," she said, adding that many legal firms she came across in her job search did not "include disability whatsoever in their definition of who was marginalized." These firms treated disability and neurodiversity as a footnote, only providing information for who to contact if you need accommodation as a person with a disability.

"That doesn't help me," she said. "I don't feel like I can disclose [having autism]. I don't feel like I can be myself."

How can employers better attract neurodiverse talent? Moss suggested talking about and re-evaluating the job description.

Rebecca Beam, Founder and CEO of Zavikon, a staffing and recruiting agency for neurodiverse talent, found out she was on the autism spectrum as an adult and said her diagnosis helped her understand "why I do the things I do and how I do them."

On the same webinar, Beam said companies should “look within first” to attract neurodiverse talent.

“Look at what types of statements you have on neurodiversity hiring but also look within to educate your teams before you start the process,” she said. “Look at educating around what is neurodiversity and what does it mean. Education is important for your teams.”

Organizational Success Stories

While there’s still work to be done in attracting and retaining neurodiverse talent, some companies have created programs to do just that and are realizing the benefits for their employees and their businesses.

Professional services firm EY is one company that’s seen success with it’s strategies to hire and retain neurodiverse individuals. In 2016, the firm piloted a Neuro-Diverse Center of Excellence in Philadelphia where it developed a unique interview process and worked with academia and non-profit organizations to identify neurodiverse job candidates.

Leslie Patterson, Diversity, Equity and Inclusiveness Leader for EY Americas and US, said the company initially extended offers to four people through the Neuro-Diverse Center of Excellence program.

“The impact those employees had was almost immediate,” she said. “In the first month, they were able to help us improve processes, they were able to help us cut the time for technical training, they learned how to automate processes faster than a typical account professional might have been able to and then they used the downtime to create training to help people learn quickly through automation,” she said.

Today, EY has 300 members in its Neuro-Diverse Center of Excellence across seven countries and 14 locations and the retention rate for neurodivergent employees is 90%.

“Our neurodivergent professionals have really helped to transform our business in a lot of different ways,” Patterson

said. “They help us to innovate, they think outside of the box, they help us to improve our processes and they help us become more efficient.”

EY is also looking outside of its organization and is helping its clients develop their own neurodiverse programs by helping them maybe avoid some of the stumbling blocks it faced in setting up neurodiverse hiring efforts and work environments.

“There are things we’ve learned along the way and they are things we don’t want people to have to slow down by making some of these same mistakes that we made early on. So we’re helping organizations across the globe set up similar neurodiversity teams,” Patterson said.

From business resource groups to co-creating neurodiversity training with a company called Uptimize, IBM is another company that’s attracting and retaining neurodiverse talent.

On the EARN webinar, Diane Delaney, Global Diversity & Inclusion Leader, People with Diverse Abilities at IBM, who recently found out she is neurodivergent, said one of the things her company offers neurodiverse employees is robust accommodations.



Those accommodations include noise-canceling headphones, software and other monetary needs, but some accommodations don't cost anything. For example, a neurodiverse employee might want to sit in a cubicle away from high-traffic areas such as the kitchen or the elevator. They might ask for their boss to write out their work for them rather than mentioning five things while passing in the hallway that would be hard to remember by the time they made it back to their desk.

She said IBM also does not identify certain job roles or departments for its neurodiverse employees to work in because the company realizes every neurodiverse person is unique with a unique set of skills and interests.

IBM also has private Slack channels where neurodiverse employees can talk and share in a space that won't be shared with others within the company. One is for autistic "IBMers" and one is for neurodiverse "IBMers," Delaney said.

"We can talk about these business-related things, accommodations, our managers, our work, but we can also talk about personal situations and things we're experiencing, and it's with a like-group and pretty often someone else has had a similar experience and can share maybe what they did to help you out," she said. "And if not, sometimes we just put, 'I am going to vent or I just need to tell you this but I don't want any advice.'"

Discussion Questions for Employees

What are the barriers to hiring, retaining and promoting people with disabilities?

How can we hold ourselves accountable to ensure people with disabilities are in job roles they want to be in without assuming or stereotyping them for a certain role?

As an organization, how have we changed our opinion, accommodation and treatment of people with disabilities and what more can be done?

As an organization, how can we do a better job of making our employees with disabilities feel comfortable at work without taking away their autonomy?

Are the job descriptions for our current job openings inclusive? Are there ways we could tweak the descriptions or application process to meet the needs of neurodiverse candidates and people with physical disabilities?

Looking at the resource groups and other programs we have for employees with disabilities, is there anything we can do to improve these resources?