Neurodiversity in the workplace: Best practices for inclusion

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"If we are going to truly have an inclusive, diverse, and equitable society, we need an accessible society, meaning that every aspect is reachable and approachable for everyone, including different brain makeups," Deschamps stated.

BLG recently hosted ***The Professionalism Series: Neurodiversity in the Workplace***, led by Wanda K. Deschamps, founder of Liberty Co, a consultancy "working to increase the participation level of the neurodiverse population in the workforce".

In part one, by drawing on research, trends and her personal story of undiagnosed autism until she was 46, Deschamps' keynote presentation centered around the importance of understanding neurodiversity and how inclusive leadership can benefit all employees and organizations.

In part two, Deschamps discussed with a panel comprised of Jane Hutchinson, Nancy Brodeur and Simon Margolis, current demographic information and data, leading best practices, existing programming and improvements to be made in Canadian workplaces surrounding neurodiversity.

What is neurodiversity and why is it important to understand?

In her presentation, Deschamps shared that the term "neurodiversity" (coined by autistic sociologist, Judy Singer, in the 1990s) refers to naturally occurring differences across human brain makeups that most often present in variances in social communication and interpersonal relations from mainstream population. Conditions that fall under the neurodiversity umbrella include autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia and Tourette syndrome. Neurodiversity is not limited to any race, ethnicity or gender. Some individuals may have dual diagnoses, while others may be entirely unaware that they are neurodivergent.

Understanding neurodiversity in and out of the workplace is important for many reasons. Deschamps shared that neurodiverse workers exist in all sectors and fields, including

the legal profession. Roughly 15 per cent of the population is neurodivergent, a figure which is assumed to be much higher due to the issue of under-diagnosis.

Deschamps explained that neurodivergent individuals often have unique strengths because of their brain makeups. She quoted Dr. Rob Austin, a professor and researcher at the Ivey School of Business at Western University, and co-author Gary Pisano, a professor of Business Administration at Harvard University from their Harvard Business Review article, *Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage*, that neurodivergent minds "can bestow special skills in pattern recognition, memory, or mathematics."

Above all, Deschamps explained that it is important to acknowledge that neurodivergent individuals should be free to live without fear of discrimination or stigma, and that the rights of the neurodiverse population, and the entire disability population, are human rights.

What are some best practices organizations can implement to increase neurodiversity inclusion in the workplace?

Raise awareness

"The number one thing that your company can do to become more inclusive of those who are neurodivergent is to begin to raise awareness," says Jane Hutchinson, Research Associate with the Conference Board of Canada.

Unfortunately, data focused on neurodiversity in employment and the workplace in general is lacking. Hutchinson shared that only 30 per cent of adults with autism reported employment in 2017, which is the most recent data. The issue is figuring out how to engage this population in the workforce due to the systemic barriers that prevent neurodivergent individuals from securing employment, she explained.

Hiring and retention practices

Oftentimes, stigmas and biases surrounding neurodiversity stem back to a lack of awareness or understanding. An important hiring practice to focus on is training managers and HR professionals in what neurodiversity might look like during the interview process. "Hiring external consultants and organizations that can help you set up more inclusive processes… looking to the experts in this topic before revamping your hiring process is a good place to start," Hutchinson explained.

Hutchinson shared that sending interview questions in advance, providing alternatives to participating in interviews (virtually, by phone or by email) when applicable, or focusing on skills-match rather than personality-match for a job are some easy fixes that can make the hiring process simpler and more accessible.

In retaining employees, Deschamps shared that we are starting to see the onus shift from placing all of the responsibility on the neurodivergent individual to modify their behaviour (a component of what is known as masking), to a shared responsibility in the workplace. Essentially, neurodivergent individuals want to know that their differences

are not bad, there is willingness to understand their needs and that they will receive support to play to their skills and talents.

Accommodate needs

Being open and flexible to providing support to neurodivergent individuals through accommodation of their unique needs sets leaders and organizations apart.

“I find that it scares people sometimes when we talk about accommodation, but in my experience it was very simple. It’s not this big, complex thing,” shared Nancy Brodeur, Senior Manager of Data and Culture at National Bank of Canada. “What we did was tweak small things and it was very easy. We tweaked our recruitment process, simplified our job postings and made everything very clear. Every step of the way we communicated with the candidates, making it clear what our expectations were and what conversations were going to be about.”

Some additional ways to accommodate the needs of neurodiverse employees could include:

- flexibility in terms of location, hours and hybrid work options;
- providing a diverse range of workspaces, including low distraction environments;
- providing technological supports like closed captioning;
- providing assistive devices like noise-cancelling headphones, which reduce or remove risk of sensory overload; or
- recognizing that there are various approaches to workplace socialization and making staff socials optional.

“The main accommodation is to be open to accommodating when your employee comes to you…don’t force but encourage an open environment where people are able to freely discuss these things,” concluded BLG’s Simon Margolis.

Open communication

When working with neurodivergent individuals, an important practice to remember is that their differences and communication styles are not a result of character flaws or failings, and to dispose of judgments and beliefs that one way of communication is better than the other.

In the workplace, Margolis suggests keeping the door open when conflicts arise and to regularly check in with the employee to set objectives and clarify tasks. It should be an ingoing conversation because needs and support might change.

If in doubt, a great approach is to ask and encourage neurodiverse team members to share what they are thinking and why, and what they would like you to know about their thoughts and ideas, Deschamps suggested.

How can organizations recruit and support neurodiverse team members?

Unfortunately, the majority of the neurodiverse population is either unemployed or under-employed, Deschamps explained.

When it comes to talent recruitment, it is essential to commit to practicing the tenants of inclusion by providing opportunities and resources for those who may otherwise be excluded. Organizations can demonstrate that they respect and value neurodiversity by using inclusive language in employment postings and communications, or by being willing to move away from traditional application and interview practices. For example, during an interview, instead of focusing on the relationship between the employee, the team members and the supervisor, the interviewee could show the candidate what the job is like day-to-day, how the team interacts, and share expectations, standards and the organization's mission in a clear way, Deschamps shared.

Additionally, support for neurodiversity in the workplace is recognizing that it belongs at all levels within an organization, including at leadership levels. Deschamps stated that this would have a multitude of benefits including increasing the likelihood of disclosure from neurodivergent individuals who see themselves represented in the leadership ranks and levels in the organization. "And we need neurotypical leaders who embrace diversity and champion it in the workplace, because if practices are not demonstrated from the top, they will flounder," Deschamps explained.

By

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