



## Is Your Company Inclusive of Neurodivergent Employees?

By Michael Bernick

Employers large and small are beginning to face a major demographic shift: the sharp increase in the neurodiverse workforce, made up of workers with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, Tourette's syndrome, and other learning and mental health differences.

Particularly, the number of people with autism entering the workforce in the next 10 years and beyond is on the rise, with the growth cutting across racial, ethnic, and geographic lines. For example, in 2005, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimated the prevalence of autism had gone up to 1 in 166 children. By 2021, their estimate went up to 1 in 44 children. In 2019, researchers with Drexel University estimated that between 700,000 and 1 million young people with autism are expected to turn 18 over the next decade. Currently, the unemployment rate among people with autism remains high, with some estimates coming in at over 80%.

Since the early 2010s, a network of major employers has developed targeted employment initiatives and protocols to better integrate this workforce into their companies. Such programs are designed to address the challenges these individuals typically face in the hiring process and to target their positive skills and work orientation. As a result, these companies have benefited from such professional attributes as high work attendance rates, job appreciation, and company loyalty.

The heightened profile of disability, equity, and inclusion functions in major employers is already leading companies to think about forms of diversity beyond race and gender. But the number of companies involved in neurodiversity hiring initiatives is modest today, as is the number of participating workers. What can we learn from the companies that have integrated these programs successfully, and how can

companies without the resources for dedicated programs make real progress in bringing neurodivergent employees into their organizations?

## In-House Neurodiversity Hiring Programs

Many major employers, including SAP, Microsoft, EY, JPMorgan Chase, and Ford Motor Company, are part of the "Neurodiversity @ Work Roundtable," a collective of leaders who get together to discuss and implement neurodiversity hiring programs.

Microsoft's Neurodiversity Hiring Program, which launched in 2015, was one of the first. Neurodivergent candidates can send their resumes to a dedicated email address and may be invited to a four-day skills assessment at the Microsoft campus in Redmond, where they can demonstrate their talent to hiring managers in a non-conventional interview setting. According to Microsoft's Neil Barnett, once a candidate is hired, they're offered a job coach from The How Skills, a nonprofit in Seattle specializing in supporting workers with disabilities. The job coach is connected with both the employee and the team manager. The manager and other team members are offered optional training sessions on autism and other neurodivergent conditions. Microsoft also gives each new hire from the program access to the broader disability employee resource group and assigns them an internal mentor, often an employee volunteer who has a friend or family member with autism.

The other 40 or so other companies that form the current Roundtable have neurodiversity employment protocols similar to Microsoft's. The Roundtable continues to add companies, especially tech firms (for example, VMware and Salesforce have launched initiatives in the past two years). Other major firms, including Lee Container and Stanley Black & Decker, have launched structured neurodiversity initiatives without being part of the Roundtable.

At the same time, the number of workers in all of the Roundtable companies remains small. Barnett, a leader in the Roundtable, told me he estimates that around 1,000 positions have been filled by these employers combined, though he emphasized that the pace of hiring is accelerating.

## Neurodiversity Workforce Intermediaries

For companies that aren't able to launch neurodiversity employment initiatives of their own, there's a new sub-sector of neurodiversity workforce intermediaries. These private-sector companies are implementing neurodiversity workforce protocols in partnership with employers of all sizes, significantly expanding the number of companies and workers participating. Further, they're bringing entrepreneurialism to the employment system for adults with developmental differences, which has needed this energy and creativity for some time.

More than 40 neurodiversity workforce intermediaries are now operating across the United States. Integrate Autism Employment Advisors, Next for Autism, and EvoLibri were among the first to appear in the early 2000s. They've been joined in the past few years by Autism Speaks' Employer Partnerships, Autism Workforce, Meristem, SourceAble, Inclusively, Neurodiversity Pathways, Potentia, NeuroTalent Works, and Zavikon, to name a few. The projected increases in the numbers of neurodivergent workers will be accompanied by increasing numbers of their family members within firms, and so far they've been the main drivers of the employer partnerships established so far.

These intermediaries have different areas of focus but certain common characteristics that distinguish them from the traditional providers of disability employment services. They're entrepreneurial ventures, founded by individuals with business backgrounds and contacts and understanding of hiring and retention processes. They're employer-facing with a focus on jobs that companies are having difficulty filling. They make individual placements but in the context of ongoing employer partnerships and workplace structures. They emphasize productivity gains for employees and utilize a revenue model of mainly fee-for-service that's paid by employers.

Potentia, for example, asks employers to identify job categories for which they've had difficulty finding or retaining employees, then asks them to set aside one or more of these positions for neurodivergent workers. Potentia partners with the employer in establishing a recruitment process that identifies qualified neurodivergent candidates

and a hiring process that enables applicants to demonstrate skills, “since many of our applicants struggle in the traditional interview process,” CEO Jeff Miller told me.

Through its main product, STARS (Spectrum Training Recruitment and Support), Potentia helps establish onboarding and support structures within the hiring company, including job coaches, mentors, ongoing counseling, and neurodiversity training for managers. It provides these structured support programs to participants for 90 days or however long is needed to get to a point of autonomy. It also seeks to build the network of supports outside of the workplace, with family members and friends recruited as part of a support network.

Potentia's current client base includes major employers in various stages of program development, including energy giants Chevron and Baker Hughes. Though most of the first job placements have been in IT, Miller is encouraging employers to include nontechnical roles. Potentia placed over a dozen workers in 2021 and expects to more than triple that number in 2022. “It's a gradual process; the right partnerships with employers can take months or even years to put into place,” Miller told me.

Another intermediary, Zavikon, draws on protocols similar to those of Potentia: alternative interview models to demonstrate skills, neurodiversity training of company staff, and a set of supports within and outside the company. Like Potentia, they build on the value proposition that companies can best benefit from neurodivergent talent through structured and intentional effort.

Zavikon utilizes a staffing industry model. They recruit and assess workers to build a registry of neurodivergent workers, use this registry and other outreach to assist employers in finding talent for hard-to-fill positions, and receive payments from employers for placements. Added to this model is Zavikon's employer training and worker supports tailored to the individual company.

Similarly, NeuroTalent Works makes individual placements of neurodivergent workers, but as part of a company's broader neurodiversity hiring initiatives. “The specific supports and training will differ among companies and neurodivergent workers, but without them, individual placements often will not be successful for either the worker or

employer," Jessica Lee, executive director and co-founder, explained to me. NeuroTalent Works has steadily increased its employer engagements to around 30 companies.

Increasing the employment rates of neurodivergent adults and adults with developmental differences more broadly will require a combination of strategies in the years ahead. Some organizations will be able to create their own, in-house hiring programs. For others, the intermediaries can be strategic partners, responding to the demographic, social, and economic forces pushing neurodiversity employment forward. In any case, as the number of neurodivergent individuals entering the workforce increases, employers must respond to the growing interest in neurodiversity employment from employees, shareholders, and customers.

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