

## QUESTION

What can organizations do to create an environment which successfully supports, engages, and retains their neurodiverse employees?

## INTRODUCTION

Neurodiverse individuals are currently one of the most underemployed minority groups: in the United States, general unemployment for neurodiverse individuals is 30-40%,<sup>1</sup> while up to 85% of people on the autism spectrum are unemployed.<sup>2</sup> An increasing number of organizations are zooming in on this issue and aiming to intentionally support, engage, and retain neurodiverse individuals through the implementation of programs, cultures, and environments. However, a vast majority of these efforts are still in their infancy and their effectiveness is largely unknown. This whitepaper seeks to address how employers can most effectively include their neurodiverse employees in the modern workplace through the examination of current academic and business research; neurodiversity and disability theory; and case studies.

**Definition of Neurodiversity:** We define “neurodiversity” as the cognitive diversity in all individuals—an umbrella term for a variety of neurocognitive developmental disorders, such as dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), and attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).<sup>3</sup> It is relevant to mention that “neurominority” is rising in popularity as an alternative term and refers to neurodiverse people who are disadvantaged in numerous life outcomes, including inferior employment opportunities and social exclusion in education.<sup>3</sup> Throughout this whitepaper, we have chosen to focus on the term “neurodiversity” as it is more commonly used in current research, and it is therefore easier to identify and validate related best practices.

**Context of Research:** There is lots of business and academic research on differences between inclusive and exclusive workplace cultures, though it typically focuses on inclusivity along the lines of race and/or gender while disability and neurodiversity are often overlooked or excluded. (This is also true of most workplace definitions of “diversity.”) Some of these findings may be transferable to neurodiversity, but critical examination is needed to determine their validity.<sup>4</sup> Minimal research exists regarding practices that improve work performance and occupational inclusion for neurodiverse individuals.<sup>3</sup> Employee assistance programs have been identified as potential sources of support which tend to accommodate mental health, and, in turn, cognitive strengths and impairments of the neurodiverse population can be overlooked. Such programs can also be vague about benefits for job performance.<sup>3</sup> This highlights a need for academic research incorporating a holistic approach on interventions that incorporate socially constructed marginalization and personal needs to generate evidence-based professional best practices.

## STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT, ENGAGE, AND RETAIN NEURODIVERSE EMPLOYEES

### I. **Employee Resource Groups (“ERGs”)**

Employee resource groups (also called ERGs, employee business groups, and affinity groups) are voluntary, employee-led diversity and inclusion initiatives that are formally supported by an organization, and are often “organized on the basis of common identities, interests, or backgrounds.”<sup>5</sup> Implementing ERGs is an increasingly popular way to help create safe, supportive, and inclusive environments within the workplace, though it is important to understand the relevant pros and cons of these programs.

**Pros:** ERG members tend to self-report these structures as being helpful in creating an increased sense of feeling “heard” and validated. They also help restore power imbalances within professional services/employer initiatives and honor the spirit of the social model, in which there should be “nothing about us without us.”<sup>6</sup>

**Cons:** ERGs often place undue burden on minority employees to take on additional duties—often unpaid—to improve group conditions. Furthermore, they may perpetuate conspiracy theories and fringe treatments without recourse to supervision.<sup>6</sup>

**Takeaways:** ERGs are a positive supplemental tool, not a final solution; “exploitation of good will and expectations of internal activism should not be a replacement for professional services or formal programs of accommodation.”<sup>6</sup> It is important that there is “clear leadership and commitment to inclusion” modeled throughout the organization, and it should be “communicated as such through allocation of resources to employee groups and including them with strategic priorities.”<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, external groups (e.g., Global Business and Disability Network) can also help organizations access networking, advice, and Human Resource toolkits. In turn, this promotes the idea sharing, knowledge of best practices, and troubleshooting regarding increasing organizational inclusiveness.<sup>6</sup>

### II. **Universal Design Practices**

Universal design (also called UD) is defined as “the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people,” regardless of age, size, or ability.<sup>7</sup> Implementing UD

practices helps to improve equity, mitigate neurominority exclusion, reduce the need for individual accommodations, destigmatize disability and neurodiversity, and improve the overall wellbeing of all people.<sup>6</sup> We highlight a few practices (below) for the sake of brevity, and highly recommend reviewing and implementing all seven of the commonly-recognized UD practices when possible (fig. 1).

#### ***Universal Design Practices (Excerpt):***

***1. Equitable Use:*** “Avoiding segregation and the need for disabled people to have a ‘different’ service/experience to nondisabled people.”<sup>6</sup> Aim to eliminate label-based inclusion (such as targeted hiring programs for autistic people), which both segregate employees into specific fields and favor candidates with the financial/social resources to be formally diagnosed (typically white men). Consider how recruitment and onboarding for all applicants can be adapted to benefit neurodiverse candidates, and how neurodiversity program efforts can be further expanded and integrated universally.

***2. Flexibility in Use:*** “The need to build in accommodation for preferences outside the norm,” such as playback speed options on training videos or alternatives to timed tests/interviews.<sup>6</sup> Try to include offers of procedural flexibility in advance of key events, acknowledging that individual differences are expected, planned for, and welcome. For example, include a list of previously provided accommodations (such as assistive technology, a preview of discussion group questions, and/or an overview of the layout) in your event invitation and request that those interested express their needs.

***3. Simple and Intuitive Use:*** Taking care to avoid unnecessary complexity and repetition.<sup>6</sup> This principle aptly applies to the design of processes, tools, and webpages, as well as document layout and word choice. Improve language accessibility (word, sentence, and paragraph length) by using the Flesch-Kincaid Scale<sup>8,9,10</sup> which is built into Microsoft Word and other widely-available programs.<sup>6</sup>

***5. Tolerance for Error:*** Allow room for mistakes and edits. Some otherwise-qualified neurodiverse people may be less able to self-regulate their work for errors. Ensure that digital forms, tools, databases, and software—as well as individual expectations—allow for review and correction.<sup>6</sup>

### **III. Leadership and Top-Down Approach**

Researchers created a Neurodiversity-Smart HR framework (fig. 2), which includes a top-down approach to successfully implement neurodiversity-friendly HR strategies.<sup>11</sup> Top managers would consider organizational resources and constraints when establishing a strategy.<sup>11</sup> Subsequently, this strategy and its business applications are communicated to middle management, which then collaborates with HR and line managers who conduct a job analysis and create job descriptions.<sup>11</sup> As noted previously, it is important that universally accessible job design practices are incorporated and therefore, the updated job descriptions would be the standard, while addressing all employees’ needs.<sup>4</sup> HR can then partner with organizations engaged in the neurodiversity field creating talent-hiring pipelines for neurodiverse people, and support networks for job skill training and development.<sup>11</sup> Subsequent steps are collective job mapping, and identifying strengths and gaps of neurodiverse candidates, while allowing for lateral moves, and avoiding the exploitation and segregation of such upcoming employees.<sup>4,11</sup> Recruitment and selection practices can then occur, while offering necessary accommodations (e.g., adaptive technology).<sup>11</sup> Hired employees would be trained for 3 to 12 months enhancing job skills, including teamwork and communication, and then such workers would be integrated into core work teams.<sup>11</sup> Throughout this process, regular feedback and needed accommodations to enhance performance would also be provided to such hired employees.<sup>11</sup> All employees would be sensitized to neurodiversity and its associated challenges, while avoiding label-based inclusion, as this could increase vulnerability to discrimination.<sup>4,11</sup>

### **III. Case Examples Promoting Inclusive Neurodiverse Workplaces**

***Organization implementing inclusive practices:*** Lemon Tree Hotels Limited (“LTHL”), a hotel company, allows neurodiverse individuals to be integrated into regular work teams, and supported by non-neurodiverse people.<sup>11</sup> The company implements its vision via attentive planning, top management support, and consistent reviews that promote engagement of neurodiverse employees.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, this organization spotlights that such efforts are incorporated in their business model indicating long-term commitment.<sup>11</sup> Also, LTHL has won awards for best accommodation, and diversity and inclusion practices, which reinforces the organization’s devotion to forming a neurodiverse-friendly work environment.<sup>11</sup>

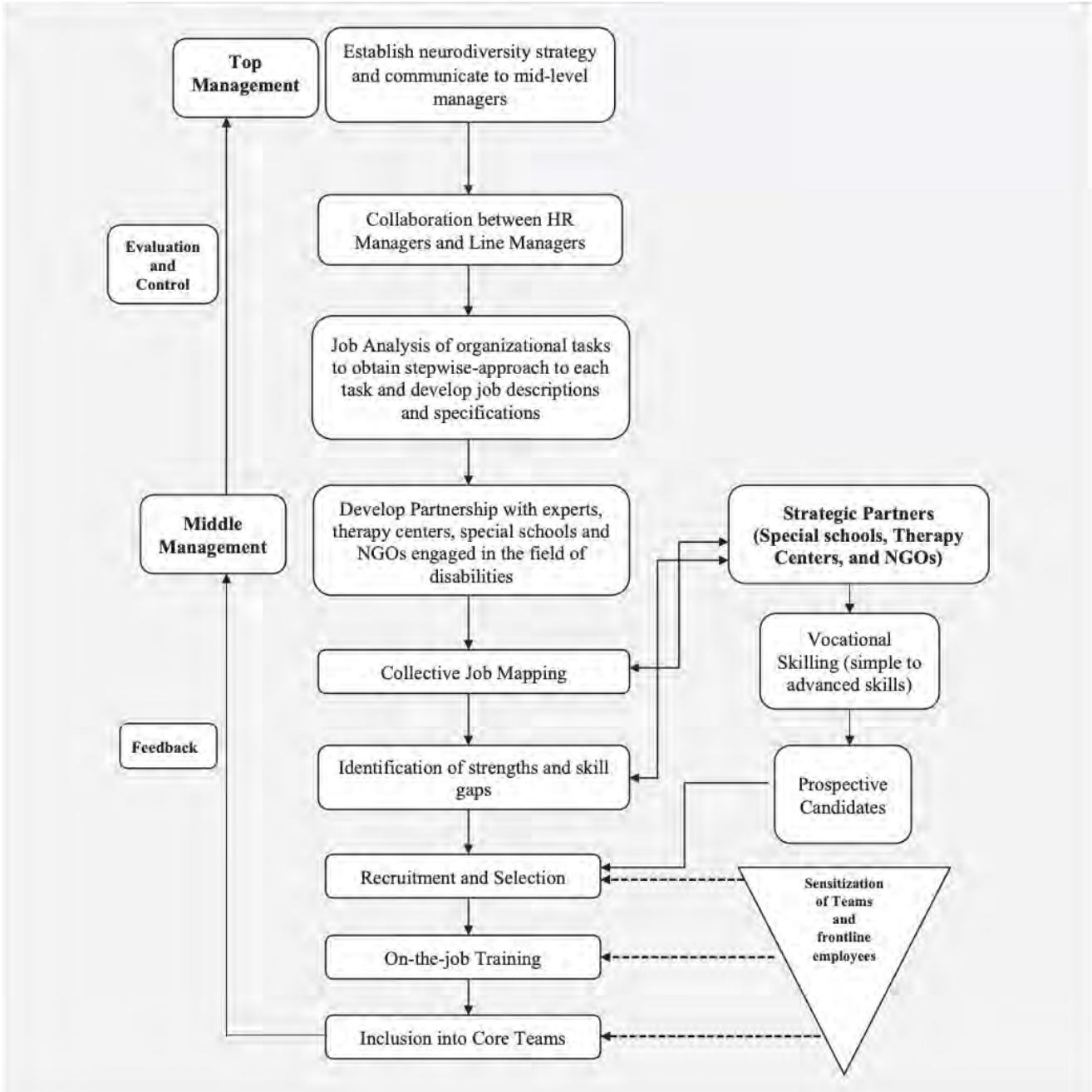
***Inclusive practice for specific neurodiverse condition:*** Employees with ASD that receive support services (i.e., ongoing customization of the initial role, lateral job moves, and career advancement) show higher retention rates; most of these employees required less than 4 support hours a month.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, many employees with ASD benefited from support with tasks including problem solving, conflict resolution, organizing their work day, and receiving and giving feedback (Brooke et. al, 2018).<sup>12</sup>

**APPENDIX: RELATED FIGURES**

Figure 1: A table of Universal Design Principles and their use in a variety of employment scenarios.<sup>3</sup>

<i>Universal Design Principle</i>	<i>Designing: Avoiding structural exclusion by focusing on performance output, not input</i>	<i>Hiring: Ensuring all candidates can perform at their best during the process</i>	<i>Contracting: Terms and conditions of employment to increase access</i>	<i>Training: inclusion in standard</i>	<i>Performance Review: Optimizing success with inclusive delivery</i>	<i>Well-being: Adapting standard well-being services to support NM needs</i>
<b>Equitable Use</b>	Job design to avoid social constructs in "essential" criteria, such as "team skills" for jobs where performance will be independent.	Use of work sample tests to measure performance in the actual role rather than social expectation-loaded interviews or proxy measures such as timed intelligence tests.	Provision for: (1) remote working; (2) flexible hours (3) general reduction in commuting obligations as standard in all employment contracts where feasible.	Ensuring access to standard training through best practice in preparation and delivery for all in house provision, details as below.	Provision of personal performance training as standard company offer, e.g., time management, planning, prioritizing and other performance issues common to NM, but also relevant to a wide range of employees and newly promoted.	Ensuring a variety of well-being (WB) initiatives, including physical health as equal to mental health. Build access to WB supports into standard onboarding and reviewing protocols so that it is standard.
<b>Flexibility in Use</b>	Craft roles for specialists as well as generalists, for example permitting senior roles without supervision responsibilities.	Offer a menu of adjustments as standard, which signals that organizational intentions are welcoming of difference. Invite candidates to contact recruiters if they would require time extensions or location flexibility, for example.	Providing flexible options for standard systems such as frequency of supervision and feedback, which may need to be increased during onboarding for some neurominorities.	Adjustable pace in learning program, allow additional time for preparation and any posttraining testing.	Permit mentors in performance reviews, provide feedback written in advance to allow reflection. Appraisal scoring to avoid penalizing where employees excel in specialist areas but are average in others.	Ensure well-being provision incorporates specialists, as standard advice may not be appropriate for some NMs who have additional cognitive and medical needs.
<b>Simple and Intuitive Use</b>	Over time roles develop "creep" and become overlaid with sometimes inconsistent responsibilities. Regular review of performance output variables, and team structures helps to ensure that jobs are designed simply and intuitively in line with the business goals	Clear instructions on how to complete application and what to prepare for assessment using simple bullet points or numbered steps.	Well laid-out terms and conditions, signposting to relevant policies and procedures, covering note, use Flesch-Kincaid score to assess language accessibility.	Consistency of formatting and training scheduling to avoid confusion or absence.	Standard format for assessing and reporting performance that is consistent and clearly communicated in advance.	Well-advertised provision with referral routes clearly presented in simple step-by-step format.
<b>Perceptible Information</b>	Role descriptions to be accessible in format, e.g., multisensory, adjustable text size/background color, printable, editable. Language to be behavioral and output driven, avoiding nuance and interpretation such as "influencing skills".	Application process in accessible formats, e.g., multisensory, adjustable text size/background color, printable, editable.	Understanding the additional needs for psychological contract — what seems obvious may need to be explicit to avoid misunderstandings. Multisensory options for ensuring policy compliance, e.g., safeguarding videos. Written contract in accessible format.	Materials to include accessible written pack and opportunity for discussion, reflection and action before completion of training.	Feedback to be factual and not interpretative, guidance and training provided to supervisors about reporting performance feedback clearly with examples.	Transparency on purpose of well-being initiative, ensure that it is perceived as optional help rather than mandated acquiescence — many NM people have had negative experiences with mental health practice.
<b>Tolerance for Error</b>	Ensure that safety, risk and client-facing deliverables have second checks built into the role design to reduce the need for 100% accuracy.	Allow candidates to review and edit application information before online submission. Encourage applicants to pause or take breaks in interviews if required. Giving clear instructions on directions and login details, as many NMs have significant impairments in way finding. Do not penalize this specifically.	Standard contract process to include review verbally as well as written, give opportunity to ask questions.	Set a tone in training for the permission of "silly questions" and create an environment of positive regard. Permit multiple attempts at knowledge tests and allow practice tests.	Allow for appeal or negotiation where performance ratings resulted from misunderstanding.	Create feedback loops for employees to submit their experiences, both negative and positive, to ensure employee voice is captured and acted upon.
<b>Low Physical Effort</b>	Understand the additional burden of commuting and busy workspaces for NMs; for some this causes physical pain and extreme fatigue, leading to poor performance. Design with minimal sensory load and travel requirements in mind.	Provision of assistive technology or materials in formats compatible with AT. Consider timing of interviews and offer flexibility around location and need to commute in rush hour.	Create as much time as possible for reviewing and competing the contracting process to avoid slow processing speed anxiety.	Use of AT and regular comfort breaks.	Breaks provided to accommodate sensory overwhelm and aid slow processing.	Proximity of support to reduce travel, ensuring well-being services also meet multisensory design and AT compatible standards.
<b>Space and Size for Approach</b>	Similarly to the foregoing, seek specialist input into the design of workspaces and, where possible, allow flexibility or compromise (shifts) in attendance on busy work sites.	Match the environment to the job performance so that you can assess in context, with the caveat that there should be a quiet environment for preparation and recruitment tasks, as there is likely to be additional anxiety for NMs.	Defined location of workstation, provision of dual monitors, sit/stand desks, and acoustic barriers as standard options in contracts.	Flexibility around onsite versus remote delivery, group size and familiarity.	Performance reviews to be conducted in friendly location and quiet, calm environment, with sufficient notice of who will be present.	Flexibility of access remote via app, video, phone or face to face. Avoid reliance on single delivery method.

Figure 2: Neurodiversity-Smart HR framework<sup>11</sup>





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**FURTHER READING**

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