



Building the neuroinclusive workplace

Research reveals strong support for neurodiverse talent, but hiring programs are just the first step.

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“Neurodiversity is the acceptance of the variance of the infinite manifestations of neurological makeup. So neurodiversity includes everybody.”

—Organizational development and disability inclusion leader, major financial institution

As many as one in five children and one in five adults are neurodivergent.¹ While research on neurodiverse adults in the workforce, including measurement of the value of broader neurodiversity in the workplace, is still relatively nascent, some organizations are beginning to recognize the opportunity that integrating neurodiverse professionals can bring to an entire organization. But creating a neuroinclusive organization—an organization that includes individuals who are and who are not diagnosed with developmental disorders that fall within the neurodiversity spectrum—requires more than good hiring programs: It should involve a foundational reframing of how the organization views work and teaming.

Building on Deloitte research from January 2022, (*A rising tide lifts all boats: Creating a better work environment for all by embracing neurodiversity*), our latest research explores new case studies and testimonials across industries and provides considerations for how leaders can advance and scale neurodiversity across their organizations.² Through qualitative interviews with human resources executives, academics, and entrepreneurs supporting neurodiversity, including some who self-disclose as neurodivergent, this article is designed to provide insights that can help organizations:

- Learn about drivers supporting advancement of neurodiverse professionals in the current marketplace and why they matter to their organization and industry.
- Prepare for the challenges that they may encounter in beginning a neuroinclusion journey or in their efforts to scale these programs.
- Shift the organizational mindset about work to successfully foster inclusive environments for neurodiverse employees in areas that go beyond hiring and include leading practices in recruitment, training and development, retention, and advancement.
- Introduce leadership and teaming styles that can help enable neuroinclusion.

Key neurodiversity definitions

- **Neurodiversity:** Judy Singer, an Australian sociologist credited with coining the term “neurodiversity,” defines it as, “A biological truism that refers to the limitless variability of human nervous systems on the planet, in which no two can ever be exactly alike due to the influence of environmental factors”.³

This definition underscores the universality of neurodiversity and the premise that no two individuals think alike. It also suggests that any organizational initiative to become more neuroinclusive should consider transforming the entire organization in lieu of patchwork solutions.

Conditions that fall within the broad definition of neurodiversity include:

- *Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)*: A neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave. (National Institute of Mental Health)
 - *Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)*: A condition that is marked by an ongoing pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development. (National Institute of Mental Health)
 - *Dyslexia*: A neurobiological condition that is marked by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition, and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. (International Dyslexia Association)
 - *Dyspraxia*: A disorder characterized by an impairment in the ability to plan and carry out sensory and motor tasks. (National Institute of Neurological Disorders and Stroke)
- **Neuroinclusion:** A workplace environment that is adaptable, flexible, and supportive to enable all employees to do their best work. (*Psychology Today*)
 - **Neurotypical:** Not affected with a developmental disorder and especially autism spectrum disorder: exhibiting or characteristic of typical neurological development (Merriam-Webster Dictionary)

Shifting demographics and a strong business case can bolster neurodiversity in the workplace

"I think we certainly see a dramatic shift, even in the last three to five years, in what workplaces are looking for. Even filling in a job application, individuals are asked all sorts of questions that you and I wouldn't have dreamt of 10 to 15, 20 years ago. I think there's an acceptance and there's a willingness to embrace those [neurological] differences because there's a new value that companies, new value that as society, we are putting onto those people who might have previously either been excluded or maybe not had a voice like they do now."

—Director of learning and development, neurodiversity training organization

Employer focus on disability inclusion and neurodiversity in the workplace has increased since the term “neurodiversity” was first defined in 1998.⁴ For example, participation in the Disability Equality Index developed by Disability:IN, an organization that benchmarks US corporate disability inclusion policies and programs,⁵ has grown sixfold, from 80 companies in the Index’s inaugural year in 2015 to 485 in 2023.⁶ More than 60 of these companies, including 11 in the Fortune 50, are part of the organization’s Neurodiversity @ Work roundtable.⁷

What is contributing to this increased interest among employers? Our interviews and research suggest that shifting demographics and a growing business case are important drivers.

The classroom as a gateway to neuroinclusion

In general, classrooms have become more inclusive to people with disabilities. In 1989, just 32% of students with disabilities were included in a general classroom for 80% or more of the school day; by 2021, that percentage more than doubled to 67%.⁸ Indeed, classroom inclusion of students with disabilities has increased significantly, even as diagnoses have largely remained flat as a percentage of overall students (figure 1).

Students who were part of neuroinclusive classrooms 10 to 20 years ago are increasingly entering the workforce. In part because of their classroom experience,

these neurodiverse individuals may be more accustomed to working with neurotypical peers, and vice versa.

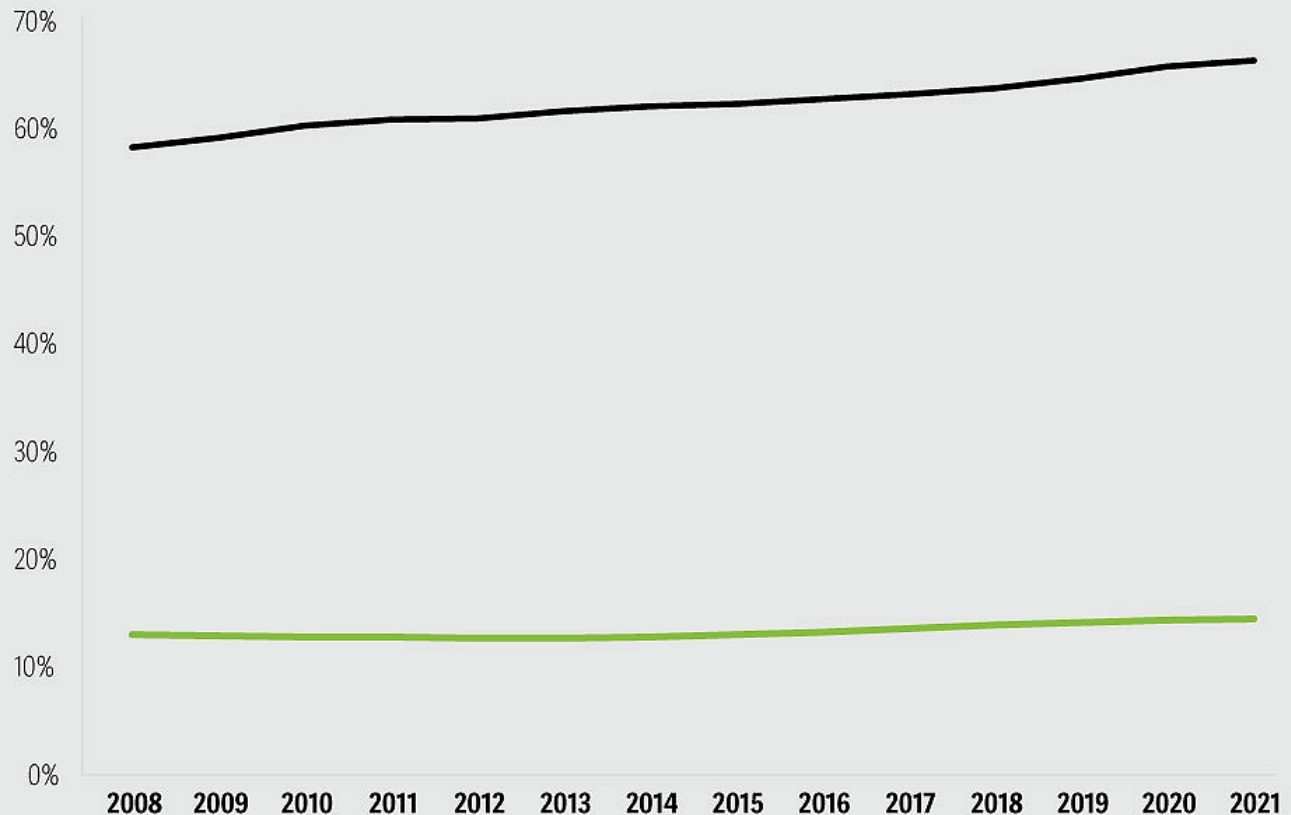
Figure 1

Students from inclusive classrooms come of age

Classroom inclusion of students with disabilities has increased significantly, and these students are increasingly entering the workforce.

● Percentage of students with disabilities as a percentage of total students

● Percentage of students with disabilities who are in a general classroom for 80% or more of the time



Source: National Center for Education Statistics.

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Increasing awareness across generations

Likely related, these younger generations are inherently more inclusive and inclined to challenge stereotypes or traditional ways of working together.⁹ However, additional demographic shifts are helping pave the way for greater neurodiversity in the workplace. Some of these include:

- An increase in diagnoses, such as ASD and ADHD, and interventions are helping to reduce the stigma of neurodiverse conditions.¹⁰
- Increasing investments in and attention to mental health and wellness programs in the workplace are helping make neurodiversity a feature rather than a problem to be solved.
- As parents of neurodiverse children advance to positions of seniority in the workforce, they see the need and opportunity to make the workplace more inclusive. These parents are driving efforts to hire neurodiverse candidates and develop workplace opportunities where their skills match their talents.¹¹
- The growth in diversity, equity (DEI), and inclusion initiatives in the workplace is driving greater visibility and awareness of previously marginalized professionals including disabled and neurodiverse professionals.¹²
- Increasing general interest in human cognition is being spurred by advances in neuroscience.

Neurodiversity can be good for business

The business case for neuroinclusion is emerging as organizations realize that integrating neurodiverse professionals can lead to enhanced organizational productivity and greater innovation.¹³ The intersectional nature of neurodiverse conditions could mean that these shifts will potentially benefit multiple populations beyond neurodiverse individuals.

- **Enhanced productivity:** Research indicates neurodiverse professionals can be more productive than their neurotypical counterparts. For example, JPMorgan Chase & Co. estimates that employees hired into tech roles through its neurodiversity program are “90% to 140% more productive than others and have consistent, error-free work.”¹⁴ Executives we spoke to also point to higher retention rates among neurodiverse professionals for successful programs.¹⁵ These same executives

suggest that accommodations to support neurodiverse professionals often benefit the productivity of their neurotypical workers as well.

- **Better overall management practices:** Many of the accommodations that organizations are implementing to benefit neurodiverse professionals, like increased clarity in communications, could also benefit management practices for the entire team. For example, the neurodiversity training company Uptimize recommends team managers tailor their communication strategy with a given neurodivergent professional. But they also recognize that this is a practice that should be done with all team members.¹⁶

- **Increased innovation:** Neurodiverse professionals can add greater cognitive diversity and creativity to teams.¹⁷ As a workforce neurodiversity advocate at a large multinational financial services company noted in our interviews, “Neurodiversity is not a superpower. [They] are different, and just like every other section of diversity, having a diverse workforce enables creativity that you're not otherwise going to have if everybody thinks the same.”

Slow progress highlights the challenges of achieving a neuroinclusive workplace

“What has been less encouraging is that the playbook that's starting to take hold is based on a set of outdated, ineffective practices.”

—Cofounder and CEO, professional services staffing firm

The progress and growth of peer-driven organizations such as the Neurodiversity @ Work roundtable, and examples of large and small companies building neurodiverse

capabilities may be inspiring. But our research indicates that scaling neurodiversity programs in organizations remains a hurdle for most companies interviewed across industries. Many programs are still at a pilot or experimental stage, retrofitted into organizations that aren't yet built to work with employees with different thinking and processing styles. As a result, such programs are often seen as “costs” rather than “investments” and can lack sufficient allocation of resources. Pilots are a good start, but scaling is a challenge that some executives interviewed say they are facing. And even if neurodiversity programs are well-considered and intentioned, their structure, outcomes, and impact may be myopic in nature and could serve to stigmatize or “other” the neurodiverse constituency.

As a result, many neurodiversity programs are likely not positioned to build a neuroinclusive organization. Some of the challenges organizations may face include:

Lack of standard definitions

Feedback from interviews with executives indicates that the lack of a singular definition of what neurodiversity means can impede organizational efforts to develop effective programs. Furthermore, definitions of categories (e.g., ASD, ADHD, etc.) are still evolving. Without widely accepted definitions of neurodiversity terminologies, it can be difficult to define what a successful program looks like.

Further, some in the neurodiverse community don't consider neurodiversity to be a disability, suggesting that classifying programs as part of a disability program may exclude or alienate some candidates. For example, neurodiversity as defined by the Stanford Neurodiversity Project makes no mention of disability: “Neurodiversity is a concept that regards individuals with differences in brain function and behavioral traits as part of normal variation in the human population.”¹⁸ The first listed objective of the Stanford program is to “establish a culture that treasures the strengths of the neurodivergent individual.”¹⁹ Scaling neurodiversity programs could remain challenging for organizations unable to shift toward this mindset.

Outdated organizational culture

Neurodiversity program leaders we spoke to indicate many older generations have a more dated view of what neurodiversity can look like, especially those who didn't grow up in neurodiverse classrooms. They often view neurodiversity inclusion programs as pertaining only to specific jobs rather than being more comprehensive across the organization.

Ideas around “how work gets done” could limit an organization's ability to scale its neurodiversity program as managers and employees are less likely to identify or consider different ways to work with neurodiverse professionals. Part of the challenge may reside in a basic misunderstanding about the capabilities of neurodiverse individuals. For example, some believe that the inherent characteristics of neurodiverse individuals makes them especially well-suited for certain types of tasks that are repetitive in nature and do not require much social interaction, like coding or administrative functions. By this reasoning, other roles that require spontaneous judgments would preclude neurodiverse individuals. “[This mindset] just assumes that there are certain types of work that neurodiverse people can and can't do ... and that is insane,” said a workplace neurodiversity consultant and coach. “Would you ask, what type of work do morning people do? What type of work do people who like asparagus do? It's a thoughtless question.”

In addition, many programs are not inclusive of *all* neurodiverse professionals and instead often focus on just one group, like those on the autism spectrum. There are also bias and equity issues at play. Girls, for example, are less likely to be diagnosed as neurodivergent.²⁰ Those who are poor are less likely to receive a diagnosis and support during their formative years.²¹ Mid- and late-career workers may also be overlooked or choose not to participate in neurodiversity programs for a variety of reasons, including generational conditioning.²² Related to this, many mid- and late-career workers are likely undiagnosed.

Unrealistic expectations

Another challenge that permeates many expectations, particularly among the neurotypical, is the “myth of the superhero.” Organizations may expect neurodiverse

employees to show exceptionality or intelligence gifts before being accepted. Not only can it limit the opportunities for an organization to integrate the skills and talents of neurodiverse professionals, but it can also place an undue burden on the neurodivergent professional to be a superstar in a specific area.

Self-disclosure and lack of trust in the organization

One of the more frequently shared challenges we heard in our interviews was employee hesitancy to self-disclose a neurodiverse condition. If one in five in the general population are neurodivergent, chances are one or more of your colleagues are neurodivergent, but may not be disclosing. Some who don't disclose may not know or have a diagnosis. Others who are neurodivergent may choose not to self-disclose, most often due to a lack of trust in their employer. One study focused on employers with disability programs found that more than 90% encourage employees with a disability to self-identify, but on average, only 3.7% of their employees disclosed their disability.²³

Considerations for designing a neuroinclusive organization: Hiring is the beginning, not the end

"Neurodiverse people can make amazing, amazing leaders if given the opportunity. How they look and sound when they do all those things? That is going to be different."

—Workplace neurodiversity consultant and coach

The leaders we interviewed noted that a holistic approach should be considered to build a neuroinclusive organization that can benefit all. This generally includes reimagining work systems, practices, and processes. While there are many elements

that could be implemented, the following can be achieved with a reconsideration of conventional workplace attitudes rather than a significant investment in funding (figure 2).

Figure 2

Designing the neuroinclusive organization



Source: Deloitte analysis, 2023.

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Plan and design: Rethinking workforce systems

Be inclusive in how you reimagine work systems. Create and reimagine your work systems based on the assumption that your team includes neurodiverse individuals. In doing so, you may be both helping the nondisclosed and achieving other forms of inclusivity in the process, making your organization a better place to work for all. For example, flexible scheduling could not only benefit undisclosed neurodiverse individuals but also those with other medical needs.

Radically change visions of promotion and career pathing. Neurodiverse individuals may face challenges in getting promoted to management roles due to prevailing expectations of what emotionally intelligent leadership looks like.²⁴ Traditionally, promotions involve managing larger and larger teams and require new skills that many individuals, both neurodiverse and neurotypical, may not be prepared for. In such situations, executives we spoke to suggest looking for opportunities to modify next-level roles to help embrace the skills and talents of neurodivergent professionals.²⁵ Some organizations create “specialist” roles that could benefit neurodiverse employees. Though not designed specifically for the neurodiverse, such roles are available for workers in general who wish to elevate their responsibilities and scope of work without necessarily adding managerial responsibilities. A skills-based promotion approach also aligns to the evolving nature of work which is more fluid, nonroutine and context-specific.²⁶ Organizations should consider what other opportunities for career advancement can be created based on the skills and talents of the neurodivergent individual without the kind of “othering” that sometimes accompanies the creation of nontraditional career paths.

Hire: Prioritizing trust in hiring practices

Our research emphasizes change across the employee life cycle to drive neuroinclusion, and there appear to be numerous opportunities for improving the hiring experience for neurodiverse professionals. As with all applicants, the first experience neurodiverse candidates have with an organization is the talent acquisition process; in most organizations, hiring processes likely need intentional, neurodiverse-supportive changes.

Reframe job descriptions with more inclusive language and focus on skills. This means reframing how we think about jobs and also how we present jobs to potential hires: for example, using plain, jargon-free language; using nongendered and personal language; and stating in clear terms how the applicant can request special accommodations.²⁷ The effect of such deliberation in crafting a job posting goes well beyond just the job posting. It demonstrates to the outside world the organization’s

culture, intent, and ways of working that can help serve as a reputation builder in general.

Recognize that the hiring process is an opportunity to begin establishing a trusted relationship with the neurodivergent professional. To ensure diversity during the interview process, include neurodiverse teammates in interviews with potential candidates. Consider different approaches to understand the candidate's skills, which could include a project-based or skills-based evaluation. And if you are uncertain about how to adjust the hiring process, consider working with talent acquisition specialists focused on neurodiverse candidates.

Ensure that promotions of neurodiverse professionals are communicated broadly across the organization, for those who would like to share their stories. When colleagues see neurodiverse professionals advancing, it may inspire others (including those who don't self-disclose). As part of demonstrating their commitment to fostering inclusion, leaders can take a prominent role highlighting neurodiverse promotions to the broader organization.

Individualize plan and design: Adapting roles for individual success

Design for the person and their skills rather than jobs. Some jobs in today's workplace are becoming more flexible and fluid. Organizations are becoming more skills-based rather than job-driven. A recent study found that 98% of HR executives surveyed plan to move toward becoming a skills-based organization.²⁸ This points to an opportunity for organizations to craft roles for neurodiverse employees that better align to their skills and personal interests.

Coach and develop: Building support systems

Assign mentors strategically. Provide mentoring and opportunities to join employee resource groups so neurodiverse professionals can meet colleagues in different departments and gain exposure beyond their particular area of focus. A well-trained mentor can engender a productive relationship with a neurodivergent professional.

Consider the potential value in developing mentorship programs on behalf of neurodiverse employees in which the mentor, too, is neurodivergent.

Establish neurodiverse employee resource groups. Establishing employee resource groups focused on neurodiversity can be an effective way to gather feedback and insights from employees with diverse neurological conditions. These groups can provide a platform for individuals to share their experiences, discuss challenges, and propose initiatives to improve neuroinclusion within the organization.

Manage and measure: Establishing metrics that drive outcomes

Our interviews with subject matter specialists suggest measurement of neurodiversity hiring and program outcomes is still in its early stages at most organizations. But even without formal tracking, some organizations are still achieving concrete steps that point to progress. Building on existing DEI measurement programs can be a good place to start.

Formalize voluntary efforts to self-identify. Expanding existing programs to self-identify disability more broadly. Track results over time and recognize that progress may be slow. Emphasize the voluntary nature of any self-disclosure initiative.

Make neurodiverse professionals in leadership positions visible within the organization. Organizations are beginning to include neurodiverse representation on leadership committees, especially neurodiversity-related communities. Consider highlighting those who are neurodivergent and already in more traditional leadership roles in the organization, assuming, of course, that these individuals are comfortable with and consent to self-disclosing. The benefits to neurodiverse employees could manifest and include lessened stigma, visible representation, improved understanding of the challenges neurodiverse employees face, greater policy action, and improved accommodation awareness, among others.

Seek input on current or planned neurodiversity programs via existing employee engagement surveys or other channels. Interviews/surveys with employees, including

individuals with diverse neurological conditions, can provide valuable insights into their experiences and perspectives. Building on existing employee engagement questionnaires or feedback channels can help the effort stick over time.

Adapt and scale: Implementing organization-wide practices

Educate and train the organization. Begin to lay the groundwork even before neurodiverse professionals join teams. Educate employees about neurodiversity and different working styles, and train them on how to collaborate effectively in teams with neurodiverse professionals.

Educate and train managers. Our interviews indicate that managers and team leaders should understand how to lead teams with neurodiverse professionals, how to be clear about expectations, how to communicate goals and strategies clearly, how to deliver clear and constructive feedback, how to define what success looks like, and how to model what inclusion of all ways of thinking entails. These skills help many, not just neurodiverse individuals.

Educate and train teams so they understand what neurodiversity means beyond myths and possible misunderstandings and what is expected of them in working with neurodiverse team members. Consider training for a breadth of roles across the organization: recruiters/hiring managers, team leaders, and team members working with neurodiverse professionals. Be aware of potential bias in how professionals are trained on how to work with neurodiverse professionals. Such biases may include assumptions of uniformity among neurodiverse individuals, reinforcement of the idea that neurodiversity is a disorder, overemphasis on social skills, among many others. Other DEI education and training programs typically teach professionals to avoid bias against race or sexuality, for example, but not necessarily to help professionals avoid bias against those with different learning or processing styles, or different ways of working. Some ways that organizations can mitigate bias in training may include neurodiverse voices in the training design process, emphasis on strengths and skills of neurodiverse individuals, reinforcement that the neurotypical are themselves diverse, and socialization with neurodiverse employees.

Promote “universal design” (accommodations available to all in the organization) to anticipate the needs of neurodiverse workers. The organization should provide for the needs of neurodiverse professionals without requiring individuals to self-identify and ask for such needs. And those needs should be addressed in an agnostic, systematic way—it can be good for organizations overall.

Leadership commitment, culture, and purpose in the neuroinclusive organization

Leadership commitment and a supportive culture are important to help fashion a workplace where neurodiverse employees can flourish. These establish the foundation to scale organizational practices and policies and engender a positive working environment where different ways of thinking can be celebrated.

Leadership commitment

- Devote organizational resources to foster neuroinclusion, including finances, investment in talent, strategies, and policies. Consider not only the hiring program but also training, communication, and the way the organization is structured. Consider investing in third party support providers (e.g., technology platforms and training providers) to help in areas of neuroinclusion where the company may not yet feel sufficiently adept.
- Communicate a vision for inclusivity. Share stories, including your own, but also those of others in leadership and across roles to develop a safe environment for professionals to self-disclose if they choose. Clearly and widely communicate that the company is advancing its strategy to be more neuroinclusive.
- Work to ensure neurodiversity initiatives are supported by and aligned to the organization’s broader DEI strategies.

Culture and purpose

- Create a culture of openness so everyone in the organization is comfortable bringing their authentic self to the workplace. Avoid “othering” people in how they think, process, or view the world. Ultimately, each person thinks somewhat differently from every other person, whether that person is objectively neurodivergent or not.
- Consider inclusion with a broader ecosystem lens and align your intentions to the organization’s broader purpose. Consider the benefit of sharing or communicating your neurodiversity efforts with stakeholders. If 15% to 20% of the overall population is neurodiverse, then not only would a sizeable percentage of your organization be neurodiverse, but so too would a sizeable percentage of your customers and supply partners. Research suggests that customers are likely to be more engaged with brands that support neuroinclusion.²⁹

Moving forward

“When you embrace diversity as a corporate goal, the underlying intent is that you are allowing different perspectives and ways of approaching the world to have their full expression. Neurodiversity is the most explicit example of that underlying value, and it's the least recognized one.”

—Senior vice president, Fair employment practices, equal opportunity organization compliance counsel, and workplace initiative; a major media organization

Fostering a neuroinclusive organization and developing the necessary mindset is an ongoing process, not a one-time initiative. Consider the following if your organization is just beginning this journey.

1. Start small. Build and communicate wins to help advance programs. Start with a readiness assessment and prepare target functions and teams who will be working with neurodiverse professionals in advance through initial education and training.
2. Work toward a vision where accommodations are available without request.
3. Move beyond old models of competition. This means learning from other companies about how they integrate neurodiverse workers and share leading practices with them as well. The more organizations work together to share leading practices—and even candidates sometimes—the more success can be achieved for those who are focused on this opportunity.

Ultimately, neuroinclusion could potentially benefit all within an organization: the neurodivergent professional, the neurodiverse professionals who don't self-disclose, and the organization as a whole. It's an opportunity that will likely only become more important over time, and there's no better time to get started than right now.

Methodology

In the spring of 2023, Deloitte conducted in-depth interviews with 20 subject matter specialists from industry, academia, and government, all with deep and first-hand understanding of current issues affecting the neurodiverse community. These 20 subject matter specialists held such titles as organizational development and disability inclusion leader, disability inclusion strategy manager, neurodiversity and ESL curriculum developer, neurodiversity coach, among many others. To supplement our primary research, we performed extensive secondary review of scholarly articles, books, reports, and other relevant literature.



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