

Neurodiversity: bringing unique talents to the workplace

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It would be a boring world if we're all the same. We're not, and neurodivergent people can bring unique talents to the workforce.

The very first time Martin Wren put forward a candidate with autism was for a role in an accounting firm. Wren thought everything was going well – up until the point the candidate said, “can we stop this interview? It's one of the most boring things I've ever done?” Wren is CEO of specialist disability employment agency [Nova Employment](#), which has placed scores of candidates over its 30 years.

As the anecdote above demonstrates, an inability to lie is a typical trait of an autistic person. People who behave like this are fantastic assets for accounting firms, where honesty is essential.

Accounting firms need to focus on competitive advantage and creating a point of difference in the market. One way to achieve this is through employing people with different strengths; for instance, by creating an environment in which neurodivergent people can fully express their talents.

What is neurodiversity?

University of New South Wales researcher Dr Dawn-joy Leong explains that neurodiversity is a term describing the broad range of human minds.

“Humanity is made up of people with different kinds of minds that function in varied ways,” Leong says. “Neurodivergent people are those whose neurological function differs from the normative population.”

Australian autism researcher and sociologist Judy Singer coined the word “neurodiversity” in the late 1990s.

“The neurodiversity paradigm is a perspective that every kind of mind is equally deserving of respect and value, and therefore potentially capable of contributing powerfully to society in positive ways,” Leong says.

The term covers people on the autism spectrum, as well as those with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette syndrome and Down syndrome, among others.

There is considerable evidence to prove the business benefits of employing neurodivergent people. JPMorgan Chase compared a neurodiverse team with a neurotypical team doing the same work and found the neurodiverse team achieved 48 per cent higher productivity.

Additionally, a 2016 study by Curtin University's [Curtin Autism Research Group](#) (CARG) found employing adults on the autism spectrum benefited employees, employers and their organisations, without increasing costs.

The neurodiverse pool of talent is also substantial – but there's a huge underemployment problem. On World Autism Day in 2016, the United Nations announced more than 80 per cent of adults with autism around the world were unemployed. In Australia, only 40.8 per cent of people on the autism spectrum are employed.

New opportunities and skill sets

This is an opportunity for the accounting sector, which could greatly benefit from neurodivergent people's skills. Wren offers another example from his not-for-profit (NFP) organisation's pool of candidates.

"When David [surname withheld] came to us he was overweight and withdrawn. By participating in our three-day-a-week program, he came out of his shell, and after about four months, was a totally different young man – someone we could present to an employer."

David was successful in securing a role in the accounting department of a NFP where, Wren says, "he absolutely blossomed".

"He started off on the minimum wage and, within a year, they promoted him. He's been on a stellar course ever since, and has now been employed for eight years. He earns every cent he gets, and what he gets is a significant sum of money. He's become very valuable because what he can do is spot errors."

Andrew Eddy FCPA, a director of [Untapped Group](#), which assists workplaces to build neurodiverse teams, says everyone thinks differently – and world-beating teams often comprise people with a range of views.

Wired for the workplace



"The idea is to have a much more vibrant and creative process in everything we do by bringing people who are wired differently into the workplace," Eddy says. "There are steps businesses must take to accommodate them, but the potential benefits are astounding. With the scarcity of available talent, we have to be looking at different ways to get a competitive advantage." Building a neurodiverse team is one way to do that.

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Untapped Group supports the **DXC Technology Dandelion Program**. Initially, this initiative placed 24 neurodiverse people in software-testing roles at the federal government’s Department of Human Services. The results were outstanding: anecdotally, the team was 30 per cent more productive than other teams doing the same work. It has subsequently placed more than 34 neurodiverse individuals in other government departments, with a 92 per cent retention rate.

In the program, a pod of autistic trainees is coached by technical team leaders and supported by an autism spectrum consultant, who helps the organisation to become aware of the needs of autistic people and what to expect when working with them.

“It’s not about getting them to fit in because it’s not curable,” Eddy says. “It’s about how to accommodate them, because only around 29 per cent of people know how to accommodate autistic people.”

Untapped Group is also assisting with rolling out the **Neurodiversity Hub** through Australian and some US universities. The intention of the hub is to connect not just IT, but also other types of businesses with neurodivergent graduates and build a work-ready human resource.

Like Wren, Eddy says neurodivergent people are often extremely valuable for accounting businesses. “If you’re looking for someone with incredible attention to detail who is happy to do repetitive tasks, then that fits well with the skill set of some people on the spectrum.”

He says internships are a way companies can trial working with the neurodivergent. Further, becoming part of the hub is another way to explore how candidates can benefit businesses. There are opportunities to fund development of training materials, provide speakers to talk to students about different careers, as well as mentoring and job shadowing.

“I’m having discussions about this with accounting firms and banks and other businesses that could gain from employing neurodivergent people,” Eddy says.

Avoid the Rain Man stereotype

Western Sydney University researcher Katie Sutherland, who is about to publish her thesis and a book on autism, warns against applying the *Rain Man* stereotype to people on the autism spectrum. The movie stars Dustin Hoffman as an autistic, mathematical genius – in one scene toothpicks fall on the floor and he’s able to instantly count them.

“Just because a person has autism or ADHD doesn’t mean they have the same mindset as another person with autism or ADHD,” Sutherland notes, “but in saying that, there are some people on the spectrum who are very passionate about numbers and systems and of course, that’s what you need if you’re working in an accounting firm.”

She says apart from their numeric skills, people on the spectrum often have a unique way of seeing a problem that’s potentially valuable to accounting firms. “That’s where innovation comes in.”

Eddy’s advice for businesses considering employing neurodivergent people is to make a strategic decision to employ them, join the hub and consider one or two activities to start with and over time build up the program.

Neurodiversity in accounting

While it's a stereotype that all autistic people are numerically gifted, many have other skills that can be a real advantage in accounting.

Researcher Dr Dawnjoy Leong says autistic employees are generally more work-oriented, dedicated and focused on tasks, and less easily distracted by social complexities. "They will be less likely to while away time chatting with other workers. Autistic people are also mostly more loyal employees and less likely to job hop if the workplace is respectful and acknowledges the autistic person's contribution."

Accounting firms' shared service centres also provide employment opportunities for neurodivergent people. "This is the engine room where transaction systems must work perfectly," Untapped Group's Andrew Eddy FCPA says. "A pod of autistic bookkeepers and accountants can take this to another level. Instead of offshoring, the opportunity is to employ people on the spectrum who can be productive, work quickly and have English as a first language."

Eddy also points to a program professional services firm EY has implemented in the US, where a neurotypical person is client-facing, but partnered with a neurodivergent analyst in a team. "It's a strength-based approach, which is a key part of working with people on the spectrum," he says.

Macquarie University professor Liz Pellicano agrees that employing people who see the world differently can be a huge asset to firms looking to innovate.

"We recently conducted a project on a unique autistic internship scheme at Deutsche Bank UK, looking at the views and experiences of autistic graduates who were part of the scheme, as well as their hiring managers and colleagues," Pellicano says. "The hiring managers involved in the study felt that the scheme could add diversity, develop a culture of inclusivity and encourage new ways of thinking."

Providing support

Employers and colleagues can help neurodivergent people be successful in the workplace by learning about the autistic paradigm, the way autistic people prefer to operate, and thinking about how each autistic staff member would like to be treated.

"The medical model of autism, painting autism as a bleak and barren existence with social impairments and lacking in empathic reciprocity, is outdated," Dr Dawn-joy Leong emphasises. "The first step is to presume competence, rather than presuming incompetence."

Leong suggests companies wanting to benefit from autistic abilities should hire consultants to advise on workplace adjustments and conduct workshops for everyone, including autistic staff.

This enables organisations to create a welcoming work environment where autistic and non-autistic employees can thrive together. After all, every business can benefit from a more loyal, detail oriented and productive team.