Communicating Psychological Science: Neurodiversity in the Workplace

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Is your mind the same as mine? Absolutely not. There is no one-size-fits-all way of thinking, perceiving, or behaving. Even though we share a blueprint of a brain structure, our genetic makeup and our experiences shape our brain connections and alter our brain functions. The result is neurodiversity, a term coined by scientists that Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries define as “the idea that people with brains that work differently are part of the normal range in humans” (Oxford University Press, n.d.).
Neurodiversity is expected in any human population. Classrooms, soccer teams, and workplaces can all be thought of as sample populations where diversity of behavior should be expected. And it’s important to note that neurodiversity—like environment—can also have positive outcomes. For example, Argentine soccer phenomenon Lionel Messi holds global records for goals and assists thanks to his unique timing and successful eye-foot coordination, along with other skills. Some call him a soccer genius. His mind clearly supports his behavior in a way that other soccer players do not experience.

The concept of neurodiversity introduces a framework where differences among individuals are expected, and underperformance (e.g., distraction, public speaking concerns) is not considered a deficit. Implications of this approach are observed in the legal regulations around hiring practices. In 2008, the Americans With Disabilities Act included depression among other “invisible” conditions as a disorder, marking a turning point for employee rights and mental health awareness (U.S. Department of Justice, 2016). This decision was grounded in scientific research pointing to individual variation. Genetic factors predict the likelihood of being prone to depression (Shadrina, Bondarenko, & Slominksy, 2018), and major depressive disorder is a form of neurodiversity stemming in part from chemical variation in the brain, similar to many other mental health conditions (Krishnan & Nestler, 2008).

Change brings awareness, and hiring regulations’ recognition of mental health conditions paved the way for research in other areas. For example, economists predict that the cost of global productivity loss stemming from mental health conditions will reach $6.1 trillion by 2030 (Bloom et al., 2012). The majority of this loss is attributed to depression and anxiety, which are strongly linked to absenteeism (days away from work) and presenteeism (decreased productivity at work) (de Oliveira et al. 2023). A closer look at the numbers created further awareness about the importance of creating more
accommodating work environments, and there is a global movement toward providing happiness in the workplace (e.g., Kawalya et al. 2019).

Greater awareness of neurodiversity has also changed mental health research. For example, recent research has explored the benefits of living with ADHD (attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder) for adults, which is another common condition in the workplace. In 2020, the prevalence of adult ADHD was estimated at between 2.58% and 6.76%, or as many as 366.33 million cases globally (Song et al. 2021). Researchers have studied the link between creativity and ADHD, and despite the lack of abundant research in this field, there are glimpses of evidence showing a positive association between the two (Hoogman et al. 2020). Individual narratives and advocacy about ADHD follow this trend. Dani Donovan, who depicts living with ADHD through her art and website, has had her work featured in media including the New York Times and BBC and has 106,000 followers on Instagram. Her approach normalizes living with ADHD, finds humor in it, and builds a community for her followers to share their own experiences, using an evidence-based approach showing that advances in science with constructive approaches create space in the public for individuals embracing their neurodivergent conditions.

Other examples of recent scientific evidence in the field can influence art, advocacy, and cultural expectations involving mental health awareness. Will we see further advances in this approach? Will scientists and grant agencies invest in positive aspects of neurodiversity? Could institutions design workplace accommodations that create personalized working conditions and result in increased productivity? Could a creative employee with ADHD be celebrated as the Messi of their team? Psychologists have an excellent opportunity to contribute further to this emerging field of research.

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References


