Neurodiversity in the Workplace: Strategies to Support Inclusivity
Introduction

Licensed Clinical Psychologist and Assessment and Testing Program Director with Utah Center for Evidence Based Treatment

Extensive training with assessment and intervention for neurodiverse populations across the lifespan

Personally valued area of work - family members with Autism and ADHD
Inclusive Definitions

Neurodiversity reflects natural brain variation that includes its own unique strengths and perspective

- Includes Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Other presentations may be Learning Disabilities, like Dyslexia, and movement conditions, like Dyspraxia

Areas of weakness can be supported by inclusive practices and accommodation if needed

Neurodiversity initiatives seek civil rights, equality, respect, and full societal inclusion for these individuals
Importance

Individuals have a choice whether to disclose and employers cannot ask- therefore you may not know whether someone you are communicating with is neurodiverse or not!

Research indicates neurodiverse individuals are underemployed

Diverse perspectives helps prevent stagnation or continuation of ineffective practices due to “tradition”

Workplaces need to focus on all levels of hiring practices and workplace structure- not enough to attain neurodiverse individuals if systems don’t support them

Communication is a two-way street- the responsibility of addressing communication gaps is not one individual
Prevalence

CDC reports 2.2% adults in the U.S. diagnosed with autism (or 5.4 million people aged 18 or older)

Estimated 2.5% to 4.4% of adults diagnosed with ADHD

Although most often diagnosed in childhood- these are lifelong conditions and can be diagnosed in adulthood

Population variants
- Underdiagnosed in women/individuals assigned female at birth
- Underdiagnosed in racial/ethnic minority groups
Autism Spectrum Disorder

• DSM-5 Criteria outlines two core domains of deficits in Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)- Important to note these criteria may be limiting

• Social communication and interaction
  • Social emotional reciprocity
  • Nonverbal communication
  • Developing, maintaining, understanding relationships

• Restricted and repetitive patterns of behavior
  • Stereotyped/repetitive movements
  • Insistence on sameness, routines, rituals
  • Highly restricted or fixated patterns of interest
  • Low or high reactivity to sensory input and/or unusual interest in sensory aspects of environment
Strengths of ASD

- Analytical thinking - mathematical and logical
- Pattern recognition
- Detail oriented
- Tasks that are sequential, linear
- Quality control
Barriers to workplace functioning

Overstimulated by sensory input

May not recognize indirect social cues - impacts “networking” and providing input in less structured settings

Difficulty adjusting to changes in routine and transitioning between tasks

High likelihood of burnout due to overwhelm and “camouflaging/masking” behaviors
Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder

A Neurodevelopmental disorder with onset in the developmental period, presenting with 6 or more symptoms prior to age 12

Encompasses ADHD predominantly inattentive presentation, predominantly hyperactive presentation, and combined presentation

Affects the following areas:
- Inattention: attention, organization, planning, time management, memory, sustained effort
- Hyperactivity: inhibition, sitting still, monitoring behaviors

Nondiagnostic features: emotion regulation, sensory processing, hyperfocus
Strengths

Creativity
Openness to jumping into new experiences
Socially engaging
Intense focus on interests (hyper-focus)
Noticing patterns
Good in a crisis- thriving in “chaos”
High energy
Barriers to Workplace Functioning

- Distractibility
- Problems prioritizing tasks
- Time management
- Low tolerance for boredom
- Sensitivities to sensory input
- Listening to others
- Regulating emotions
Inclusivity
Strategies Enhancing Inclusion

1. Adjust hiring practices
Nontraditional hiring

Write clear job descriptions for posting
  ◦ Clearly state your organization welcomes neurodiverse talent

Use task-based or objective assessments
  ◦ More effective at demonstrating on-the-job skills than interviews

Ask specific questions instead of open-ended ones
  ◦ What are your strengths? Vs. Describe a time when you added value to a project you worked on

Give opportunities for open disclosure
  ◦ “How can we help you be most effective at doing your job?”

Discuss accommodations
Strategies Enhancing Inclusion

1. Adjust hiring practices
2. Communicate clearly using straightforward language
Clear Communication

Avoid sarcasm, abbreviations

Make job descriptions and expectations clear: What is absolutely required, what is preferred, and what is just nice to have?

Give specific timelines for completing tasks- clearly label urgent tasks as urgent

Present information in multiple modalities- having text and a/v clips
Strategies Enhancing Inclusion

1. Adjust hiring practices
2. Communicate clearly using straightforward language
3. Challenge Assumptions
Assumptions

Neurodiverse individuals may speak directly, and it can be mistaken for rudeness

Ask for clarification if you’re not sure of intention

Provide feedback on why you were offended by something, giving the other person the benefit of the doubt

Investigate problems completing work before making judgments
  - Avoidance may be due to problems knowing what expectations are or prioritization of tasks
Strategies Enhancing Inclusion

1. Adjust hiring practices
2. Communicate clearly using straightforward language
3. Watch for assumptions about others
4. Pace information flow to ease understanding
Pace Information Flow

Strengths of neurodiverse includes detail-oriented, analytical thinking. However, prone to information overload

Present information in a logical and ordered sequence

Pause between sharing, ask for clarification before moving forward

Have structured agendas for meetings
Strategies Enhancing Inclusion

1. Adjust hiring practices
2. Communicate clearly using straightforward language
3. Watch for assumptions about others
4. Pace information flow to ease understanding
5. Accommodate sensitivities
Sensory Friendly Environments

Change lighting

Limit noise/distractions

Allow flexibility in remote work

Flexibility in time of day- focus on work performed instead of hours rendered

Accommodations are individualized- discuss with employees types of accommodations that would allow them to perform to the best of their abilities
Strategies Enhancing Inclusion

1. Adjust hiring practices
2. Communicate clearly using straightforward language
3. Watch for assumptions about others
4. Pace information flow to ease understanding
5. Accommodate sensitivities
6. Offer skills training
Build Skills

Orient new employees with training in social skills and expected workplace behaviors

Provide feedback that is:
- Timely: as close to the behavior in question
- Meaningful: gives actionable suggestions to change behavior
- Specific: behavior oriented
- Direct: tactful, but honest
Strategies Enhancing Inclusion

1. Adjust hiring practice
2. Communicate clearly using straightforward language
3. Watch for assumptions about others
4. Pace information flow to ease understanding
5. Accommodate sensitivities
6. Offer skills training
7. Build community partnerships
Social Partners

Many government and nonprofit organizations exist to support neurodiverse individuals in obtaining and retaining employment

Organizations address factors outside of work that workplaces may not have the expertise or role-expectation to address

North Carolina:
- North Carolina Council in Developmental Disabilities: nccdd.org
- NC Department of Health and Human Services: ncdhhs.gov
- Linking North Carolina with Innovative Talent (LiNC-IT): linc-it.org
- Autism Society of North Carolina: autismsociety-nc.org
Thank you!

For more information regarding resources for neurodiverse individuals, consultation, or services*, please visit us at ucebt.com

*clinicians at UCEBT are PSYPACT certified, and can provide telehealth services to individuals in North Carolina
Resources

Stop Being Invisible: Overcoming Communication Barriers by William Lane

The Type B Manager: Leading Successfully in a Type A World by Victor Lipman

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: CDC.gov

Organizations

◦ Neurodiversity in the Workplace: nitw.org
◦ ADDitude: additudemag.com
◦ Children and Adults with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder CHAAD: chaad.org
◦ Aspergers/Autism Network AANE: aane.org
◦ Fair Play Talks: fairplaytalks.com