

Promoting Social Awareness on Neurodiversity

Forum: Virtual World Health Organization

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Introduction

Neurodiversity is a concept that regards and respects individuals with differences in brain function and behavioral traits as part of a natural variation in the human population. Neurodiversity is a biological fact, just like any other human diversity such as gender, race, and ethnicity, which stems from genetics and environmental factors. Proponents of neurodiversity work to promote social support systems and draw attention to the value of neurological differences by focusing on providing help and accommodation, instead of pathologizing them. But, because neurodiversity is not always easy to recognize externally, it is unfortunately neglected and often highly misunderstood.

Background

The term neurodiversity was coined by an Australian sociologist Judy Singer who stated that naturally existing variations in neurological structure and function among human beings should be respected by the society. Neurodiversity only started to gain public attention when Singer's work on autism and neurodiversity became widely known as a result of her chapter "*Why Can't You be Normal for Once in Your Life?*" which was published in 1999. Following this, the Neurodiversity Movement was born out of the Autistic Rights Movement in the 1990s and it has since been led by autistic writers and activists, including Jim Sinclair, Judy Singer and Kathleen Seidel.



Illustration on the concept of neurodiversity

Initially, the term neurodiversity referred most commonly to autism but has since come to include other widespread learning and developmental varieties. According to The Autistic Self Advocacy Network, neurodiversity is a term that broadly covers “neurocognitive differences such as autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, Tourette’s syndrome, anxiety, obsessive-compulsive disorder, depression, intellectual disability, and schizophrenia, as well as ‘normal’ neurocognitive functioning, or neurotypicality.” Prior to Singer’s statement, these neurological differences were considered as medical deficits in which conditions such as autism or ADHD were classified as disorders to prevent, treat, or cure. Although, neurodiversity opposes this generally accepted medical view, little awareness has been noted among the public.

In the United States alone, approximately 15% of the population has dyslexia, over 6 million children have been diagnosed with ADHD, and 1 in 88 children have autism. As these neurological differences are becoming more prevalent globally, it seems imperative that the public

needs to be more well-informed in order to prepare a more inclusive community for all.

Problems Raised

Proponents of the Neurodiversity Movement believe that the disabilities accompanying neurodiversity, most notably autism, are results of restrictions imposed by the society, not from the neurological difference itself. The social model of disability aims to eradicate discrimination and oppression against people with disability through accommodation and education. They believe that the solution lies in not fixing the person, but in changing our society to better adapt and include the neurodivergent. However, some of those who suffer directly from autism and their families disagree with this view as autism is a much more complex problem to them, which cannot be reduced to a simple redemptive ideology.

Supporters of Neurodiversity Movement also deny the existence of severe autism. They believe that everyone is just as autistic than all others. In reality, there are significant disparities in the level of function that a person with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can display. For example, many individuals with level 1 or high-functioning autism, with a few debilitating conditions, and with minimal need of support, may not consider themselves to be disabled. High-functioning autistic people have normal or above-normal verbal skills and intelligence, with only issues occurring in the social context. But on the other end of the spectrum, individuals with level 3 or low-functioning autism suffer most severely in everyday life. Most low-functioning autistic people cannot talk or have great difficulty in using words to communicate, accompanied by other behavioral or mental abnormalities such as self-mutilation and distancing from others. Therefore, some argue that the challenges faced by more severe cases fit better to a medical model. There seems to be a huge controversy among the supporters of Autism Rights Movement within the Neurodiversity Movement which needs to come to an agreement before a wider message to the public can be delivered.

Possible Solutions

Encouraging Neurodiversity at Workplace

Hiring employees with neurological differences will not only raise social awareness on neurodiversity but it will also play to the company's advantage. Outstanding talents and skills possessed by the neurodivergent workers can thrive when neurodivergent employees are accommodated to perform at their optimal capacity. According to Rethink Benefits, neurodivergent employees can be up to 140% more productive and 40% faster at problem-solving than their neurotypical peers. Despite the apparent capabilities displayed by the statistics, people with neurological differences suffer from high rates of underemployment or unemployment to this day.

The value of neurodiversity within working environments has not been appreciated until recently. However, in light of the finding, more companies and businesses – both large and small – are beginning to employ workers with



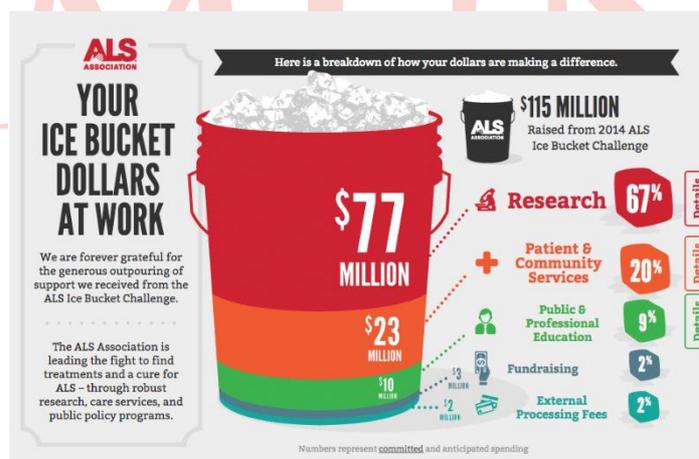
Microsoft Corporation, world's leading technology company that promotes neurodiversity at work

varying neurological differences. For example, Microsoft launched an Autism Hiring Program in 2015, designed to “attract talent and build an inclusive approach to support individuals on the autism spectrum.” The program has been largely successful and therefore Microsoft plan to increase the ratio of their autistic employees in the coming years.

As more neurodivergent workers are employed and they prove to show that they provide value to their companies, it will be a good way of raising awareness and showing the public that neurodivergent workers are no less capable than their neurotypical peers. The public or neurotypical people will be more informed that the differences in neurological function is in fact not a disorder but a unique characteristic of human. If more neurodivergent people can settle into and become a part of various working environments, a more inclusive and diverse society can be achieved.

Utilizing Social Media

Social media is a powerful tool and it has become increasingly popular over the past decade with a total of 3.81 billion users worldwide in 2020. It has changed how people communicate and has created opportunities to reach out to a much wider audience online. Consequently, it can often achieve outstanding outcomes to bring positive influence around the global society. In 2014, the ALS Ice Bucket Challenge was launched with the goal of raising money for funding research on amyotrophic lateral sclerosis, also known as ALS. The challenge involved sharing a video where participants pour a bucket of ice on their heads and then nominate others to do the same. The nominees had 24



Breakdown of how the funds raised for ALS Ice Bucket Challenge will be spent

hours to comply or give up by making financial donations to the cause. Along with #ALSIceBucketChallenge, the challenge rapidly proliferated throughout various social media platforms and gained massive attention from the public and mass media. With more than 2.4 million participants, they were able to raise an estimated total of \$115 million. The success of this campaign led to greater awareness of the disease and have raised an incredible amount of funds for further research. If social media can be utilized in the same way as it did for #ALSIceBucketChallenge, there will be increased interest and awareness towards neurodiversity.

Key Players

Neurodiversity Foundation

Based in Netherlands, the Neurodiversity Foundation aims to “create a society that works for all individuals regardless of their brain types”. They arrange projects, campaigns, researches, and community events to enhance social equality, connections and cooperation between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals, thereby striding towards a more inclusive, neurodiverse society. The Neurodiversity Foundation has its own online program, Neurodiversity Education Academy. It includes workshops for teachers on creating a neurodiverse friendly classroom, training on how to encourage the development of growth mindset in children to be more embracing differences in others, as well as lectures and talks.



The foundation-led annual event, Neurodiversity Pride Day, takes place annually each with a different theme. This year, Neurodiversity Pride Day will be taking place on the 18 June 2021 with the theme ‘Celebrate who you are, in your own way’. The aim is to show appreciation, support acceptance and inclusion in a society where everyone is distinctively unique. The Neurodiversity Foundation is a great example of a partner that governments could work with in order to carry out events on a larger scale to promote the awareness towards a greater audience.

Uptimize

Uptimize aims to pioneer neurodiversity in the workplace through online platforms. Uptimize supports online training program both for neurodivergent applicants, and for employers looking to incorporate neurodiversity to build more inclusive, innovative and effective teams at work. Its training tools are developed through collaboration with global neurodiversity experts, focus groups, and leading employers in the area of neurodiversity at work. Major companies, including Google, Microsoft, and JPMorgan Chase, have worked with Uptimize to embrace neurodiversity at work and become neurodiversity smart.



Glossary

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): includes a combination of persistent problems, such as difficulty sustaining attention, hyperactivity and impulsive behavior.

Autism: a developmental disorder of variable severity that is characterized by difficulty in social interaction and communication and by restricted or repetitive patterns of thought and behavior.

Neurodivergent: having a brain that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of “normal.”

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Neurodiversity: the diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species.

Neurodiversity Movement: a social justice movement that seeks civil rights, equality, respect, and full societal inclusion for the neurodivergent.

Neurotypical: having a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of “normal.” Opposite of *Neurodivergent*.



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