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How can we be more supportive of neurodivergent employees in the workplace?

Chika Aghadiuno explains

Neurodiversity is rightly starting to receive more attention, and is an area that the IFoA and its Diversity Action Group (DAG) believe warrants greater awareness. But do we understand what is meant by neurodiversity, and how we can be ‘neurodiversity smart’?

What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity refers to the range of differences in individual human brain function and behavioural traits. It is estimated that one in seven people are neurodiverse, meaning they experience the world and process information differently from most people. Neurodiversity proponents view neurocognitive styles as operating across a continuum, rather than a binary of able/disabled or less/more intelligent. While labelling can be problematic, understanding the common forms of neurodivergence using the deficit-based medical model can be helpful (see Table 1).

Please note that this article does not specifically cover ‘acquired’ neurodiversity, such as that acquired through brain trauma. Additionally, while bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia and anxiety are sometimes included under the umbrella of neurodiversity and/or the umbrella of mental health, and are important to consider in the context of creating an inclusive, effective working environment, they are also not specifically covered within this article.

The case for neurodiversity

‘Neurodiversity-smart’ employers seek to embrace and maximise the talents of people who think differently. Not being truly ‘neurodiversity-smart’ may be ‘neurodiversityblind’

or neurodivergent. According to neurodiversity proponents, a person who thinks and behaves differently may have strengths and weaknesses, which, when understood, may make that individual more or less effective in different situations.

Neurodiversity proponents believe in the concept of ‘neurodiversity-smartess’, which is the ability to identify and utilise neurodivergent strengths.

TABLE 1: Common forms of neurodiversity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Neurodivergence</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Prevalence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Autism spectrum, including Asperger’s syndrome and other forms of autism (previous in spotlight autism spectrum)</td>
<td>Characterised in the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) by repetitive, restrictive and repetitive behaviours, and social communication challenges. Most people on the autism spectrum also experience some form of sensory sensitivity due to functional hyper-connectivity across multiple brain regions, which, when experienced, may make the individual more or less sensitive due to functional hyper-connectivity across multiple brain regions.</td>
<td>1-2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyslexia</td>
<td>Affects the development of literacy and language-related skills, and is characterised by difficulties with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory, processing speed and the automatic development of skills. It may also lead to an individual’s other cognitive abilities.</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dyscalculia</td>
<td>Affects the development of mathematical skills, and is characterised by difficulties with understanding number concepts, learning number facts and procedures, and understanding the concept of numbers.</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developmental coordination disorder (dyspraxia)</td>
<td>Affects the coordination and perceptive perception includes vision, hearing and proprioception awareness of where your limbs are in space.</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention deficit (hyperactivity) disorder (ADHD)</td>
<td>Characterised by symptoms of inattention, overactivity and impulsivity, it is a disorder that affects the ability of a child or adult to focus and control their actions or behaviour.</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Neurodiversity proponents believe in the concept of ‘neurodiversity-smartness’, which is the ability to identify and utilise neurodivergent strengths. Being neurodiversity-smart This is about developing an awareness, understanding and acceptance for neurodifference, celebrating and leveraging the talents it can bring, and creating an adaptive and inclusive workplace environment.

A personal perspective

Alicja Nocon, a founder-member of GANH, shares her experience working as an actuary on the autism spectrum.

“I have worked as a longevity and risk actuary across consulting, insurance and reinsurance for a decade now. Most of my strengths as an actuary can be linked to the autistic traits as defined in the DSM-5 manual used to diagnose the condition. For example, my expertise in longevity is the result of having a fixed interest that is abnormal in intensity of focus in this area. It just so happens that my ‘obsession’ with statistics and population data has been encouraged and valued as an actuary.

Social communication and interaction is more difficult, and often anxiety-provoking for many autistic people. However, job crafting, coaching and having a caring and honest ally in the workplace can reduce the challenges of being wired differently. Having spent the last year making sense of my autism diagnosis, which occurred in isolation, I now want to use my experience to educate others in my role as a neurodiversity and wellbeing consultant.

“A different perspective”

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Spotlight on autism

According to the National Autistic Society, one in 100 people are on the autism spectrum and there are around 700,000 autistic adults and children in the UK. Like other forms of neurodivergence, autism should not be seen as a ‘disorder’ but viewed more constructively as a neuroprocessing style that results in a very different experience of the world. People on the autism spectrum often show many of the following tendencies:

**Strengths** – They are often logical, data-driven thinkers, free from confirmation bias and strong at problem-solving. They often have a strong ability to focus for long periods of time, and to assimilate and retain detailed information. They are frequently reliable and loyal employees.

**Challenges** – Autistic people may find elements of social interaction challenging. For example, they may find it hard to ‘read’ other people, and often think literally. They may appear aloof to colleagues due to issues with eye contact, tone of voice, shyness and social anxiety. They often want to socialise and be included, but are anxious and unsure about how to do so.

Some autistic people may find conceptualising and illustrating abstract ideas difficult, and may struggle with adapting to changes in structure and routine. Over-stimulation in a busy, noisy workplace can also be a factor that prevents people from performing at their best.

Neurodiversity adjustments can be easy to implement and inexpensive. They can cover a wide area and include:

- **Fair recruitment and development practices**: Clear job descriptions; accessible assessments and tests that are neurodivergent-compatible; thoughtful onboarding process.
- **Inclusive environment**: Workspace accommodation (for example allocated seating, lighting, noise, equipment); avoidance of rigid competency-based performance development frameworks; developing a culture supportive of greater understanding and acceptance of neurodiversity (champions, training).

A comprehensive list of neurodiversity adjustments can be found in the DARE Report on Adjustments (bit.ly/3yMjgoU), which was commissioned by University College, London and autism research charity Autistica, and co-produced with autistic people.

**What does this mean for the IFoA?**

The IFoA and DAG are committed to embracing all aspects of diversity and inclusion in terms of our members, volunteers and member firms. We recognise that many within the actuarial community may identify as neurodivergent. Many of the strengths associated with neurodivergent individuals play well to the analytical, focused and innovative thinking that we need within our profession.

We are delighted to be working with the Group for Autism, Insurance and Neurodiversity (GAIN) to consider strategies and initiatives we can adopt and share with our members and member firms. GAIN is a new not-for-profit organisation and hub for insurance, pension, employee benefits, wealth and investment colleagues. Its aim is to capitalise on the clear match between the strengths of neurodiverse people and the shortage of these skills in the industry, especially as the dependency on data continues to grow. To find out more about GAIN, please visit gaintogether.org.

We are also pleased to have joined forces with the UK’s National Autistic Society to provide guides on autism and the actuarial profession (bit.ly/35Ak3Em). These were launched on the IFoA website on 18 June, which is Autistic Pride Day. The objective is to help raise awareness and understanding of autism, provide support to autistic members and members who work with or line-manage autistic employees, as well as provide information and guidance to autistic people considering a career in the actuarial profession.