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Neurodiversity

Autism Doesn't Hold People Back at Work. Discrimination Does.

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Illustration by María Hergueta

Summary. Did you know that an autistic professional is up to 140% more productive than an average employee when properly matched to a job that fits their skills? Yet, discrimination against neurodivergent people continues. That's because most of the "common"... **more**

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Every time I write about autism and neurodiversity, my inbox fills with notes from talented young professionals. I've heard from people who mask their autism to avoid stereotyping or discrimination at work. I've read painful recollections from employees who are shunned, bullied, exploited, or underpaid as a result of being neurodivergent. Then, there are those who were rejected or fired after disclosing autism, ADHD, or another neuro-difference. Some of them want my advice. Others want to be heard. Their stories vary, but each resonates, in some way, with my own.

I am a professor of organizational psychology. I am also autistic. I always knew I was different, but until last year, when I was officially diagnosed, I genuinely believed that to be treated better, I had to work harder to fit in — adjust to and please others, often at the expense of my wellbeing.

Throughout my career, I've had a hard time regularly socializing with colleagues over lunch and attending large gatherings. My hypersensitivity to sound and smell makes crowded spaces highly unpleasant. Lunchtime chatter, and especially music, hit my ears with the intensity of a leaf blower. Certain aromas make me physically sick. While some colleagues have been considerate of my needs, others have weaponized them. A coworker once threatened to play loud music if I did not comply with their request.

For a long time, I blamed myself for the bullying I experienced. In every instance, I responded by working harder. I would stay up late, take on more, and prioritize the needs of others over my own.

The more I tried to fit in and please people among credit-stealing and cutthroat competition, the more I struggled. I started using ableist terms like “weird” to describe myself.

> **Like many neurodivergent people, I could not find an accurate reflection of myself in the media, in my workplace, or in the world at large. I lacked the language to defend myself from my internalized exclusion.**

Think of it this way: If you are neurotypical, or part of any majority group, you likely see reflections of yourself wherever you look: on billboards, in magazines, while watching your favorite TV shows, in novels and in movies, and in the coworkers you relate to. Now imagine if all of that was taken away, if more often than not, you were surrounded by people who didn’t experience the world, feel, or think like yourself. You would feel alone. You might even lack the tools you needed to explain those feelings to other people, because you would have to do more work to seek out and discover them. I even invented a word for this feeling – unincludable.

Feeling excluded and invisible is typical for neurodivergent people. Pop culture narratives make this worse. We are often infantilized or portrayed as unemotional (almost robotic) people who love tech or who struggle to triumphantly overcome everyday woes. Reducing us to stereotypes and “othering” us shapes how we are perceived by others and by ourselves. The result is an overwhelming number of autistic people who feel isolated, misunderstood, and discriminated against in life and at work.

The thing is, I am not an unfeeling robot, a math whiz, or a child. I am a highly independent adult who likes helping people and cherishes a sense of community. It was only when I found a

neurodivergent community that I discovered just how nuanced and diverse we are. We are creative, funny, sensitive, empathetic, accomplished people who help one another work through lifetimes of self-blame and self-hate. Through these relationships, I've realized that we are not the problem. Rather, it is miseducation surrounding what it means to be autistic and neurodivergent — especially in the workplace.

The Autism-Employment Paradox

Did you know that autistic professionals can be up to 140% more productive than the typical employee when properly matched to jobs? While we should not generalize such results to the entire population, research shows that professionals on the autism spectrum bring valuable strengths to the workplace, including (but not limited to) understanding complex systems, independently focusing on tasks, reliability, and loyalty.

Still, in the U.K., the unemployment rate for autistic people is as high as 78%. In the U.S., that number jumps to 85%. A 2020 report on U.K. employers sheds some light on these numbers, as 50% of managers surveyed admitted they would not hire neurodivergent candidates.

This discrimination is a systemic problem. For instance, consider a major workplace barrier: the job application process. Both the process and the content surrounding "how to nail a job interview" heavily favor neurotypicality. As a consequence, many autistic people feel pressured to follow popular advice and appear as non-autistic as possible to land and keep a job.

> **To debunk the harmful stereotypes and change the exclusionary norms, much-needed conversations surrounding what autism is and is not should be led by autistic voices.**

This pressure triggers an unconscious strategy called neurotypical-passing, masking, or camouflaging. It can look like an autistic person forcing themselves to make eye contact even when it is uncomfortable, attending a networking event at the cost of being ill from the loud noise, or practicing for hours to effectively small talk with neurotypical hiring managers. Research indicates that camouflaging is unsustainable and damaging. It can result in autistic burnout, illness, and job loss.

The personality-focused job application process is a barrier for many people who may be better at performing the job than at talking about themselves — and it is just one example of the many workplace "norms" that are not inclusive of neurodiversity.

Building an Inclusive Workplace

The true onus lies on companies to create an equal playing field by crafting policies inclusive to all employees. When our workplaces fail to recognize our experiences — in all of their nuances — they also fail us because they lack the understanding and the tools to create welcoming environments.

That said, to debunk the harmful stereotypes and change the exclusionary norms, much-needed conversations surrounding what autism is and is not should be led by autistic voices. The same holds true for other kinds of differences as well.

Autism is not an intellectual, learning, or mental health disability (though it may co-occur with any of these). It is a complex developmental condition that affects our social, sensory, and communication experience, and it may manifest differently in men and in women. Autism is a "spectrum" with many dimensions, and the specifics of navigating the world as an autistic individual are different for everyone.

Along with flexibility, belonging is key for neurodivergent employees. When organizations respect our identities and support people bringing their authentic selves to work, everyone

has the opportunity to succeed. While this change ultimately has to be a systemic one, you (the worker) are not powerless.

There are some things autistic professionals (or anyone) can do to own their identity and excel at work.

Your disclosure is your decision.

People hide their identities at work for many reasons. Some may want to disclose their autism early in the application process because they need specific accommodations, like receiving interview questions in writing or a quiet environment at work. Others may want to get to know their colleagues and build some trust before disclosing. Whatever your decision is, it can come from a place of dignity and strength.

For instance, if you're in a job interview, you could be upfront while also pointing out your strengths by saying something like: "I am sensitive to noise, but that also means I'm highly focused at work." If you wish to disclose without revealing your diagnosis, you can make your preferences clear in a subtler way: "I work better when I'm in a quiet space. It makes me more productive."

While some managers or coworkers could react to disclosure negatively, don't let that discourage you. When you own who you are, you may end up finding some allies or even inspire others to disclose their disability or identity.

Personally, I find disclosure both liberating and socially responsible. When we assimilate into systems that discriminate against us, we may unwittingly perpetuate discrimination. That said, don't pressure yourself. You might be a private person, your environment may not feel safe, or perhaps you just want to do more research. So, take your time and if (and when) you feel prepared to talk about your identity, remember that your difference isn't a flaw. It's just that: a difference.

Define what career success looks like to you.

People work for different reasons, and these reasons can affect how we define our success. For some, work is a job that helps them pay the bills. For others, a job can be their calling or an opportunity to build a career.

Your career path depends on your goals and priorities. Take the time to understand what you value, why you value it, and how you see those impacting your long-term growth. Ask yourself what motivates and drains you to understand what it is that you really want — it could be a flexible work-life, an intellectual challenge, money, or a career in industries that have been traditionally unwelcoming to us.

Some may find success in traditional employment and grow within the same company. Others may prefer channeling their intense focus via entrepreneurship, or appreciate the freedom of solopreneurship which allows you to be your own boss. I enjoy functioning as an intrapreneur within an organization, creatively developing new growth areas.

Know that it's okay to take your time to figure out what path feels best to you. If you're still unsure, I like the advice Dorie Clark gives in her new book, *The Long Game:* "Optimize for interesting." Think about what you find interesting instead of forcing yourself to optimize for money, passion, or success. (Is it books? Nature? Technology? Science?) Developing yourself in that area can open up opportunities that work with your mind and will help you create your unique niche and personal brand.

Craft your own job.

One of the characteristics of being autistic or neurodivergent is a spiky or uneven set of abilities, such as having an exceptional memory or writing ability but weak organizational skills. Spiky profiles can be confusing to neurotypical managers and

coworkers. For instance, highly verbal autistic people are assumed not to have any struggles, while those using communication devices might be underestimated.

To overcome this challenge, focus on your unique abilities by practicing job crafting, a strategy of changing some aspects of your tasks, mindset, and relationships to align with your strengths. For undiagnosed or undisclosed autistics, this might be the key to a sustainable work-life.

> **You deserve better, and it is not disloyal to challenge or leave an abusive situation. That is you being loyal to the person who very much needs your allyship: yourself.**

When job crafting, it is essential to respect organizational and coworker needs. For example, if your job involves communications with clients, check if the company allows for emailing rather than cold-calling as a strategy. Perhaps writing smart and persuasive messaging is your strength — so don't sell yourself short. Ask your manager if you can switch strategies for a month and report back with your progress.

In another instance, perhaps one of your teammates prefers social interaction but hates research while you enjoy research and dread social overload. In this case, you could propose to your colleague — and then to your manager — trading responsibilities so that everyone benefits.

That said, if the core responsibilities of your role are a poor match for your abilities, you may need to explore opportunities better aligned with your skills, interests, and values. To do that, ask yourself what you like, what you are objectively good at, and what energizes you. Internships, temporary jobs, shadowing, and

informational interviewing can help you learn about non-obvious aspects of jobs without a full trial-and-error. (You can also use this free Holland RIASEC assessment of interests.)

Make space for purpose in your work.

Research shows that autistic people are often passionate about making a difference. Most organizations provide opportunities to contribute to your workplace culture via Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) and committees. These internal employee groups are typically focused on bringing people of specific identities or life circumstances together (e.g., culture, disability, caregiving) and can help you share your ideas with like-minded and supportive colleagues.

If involvement opportunities at work are limited, look for local and online collaborations with communities or associations that champion a cause you're passionate about. These could be disability-rights organizations, gender advocacy groups, or animal shelters. You can also use your professional skills to further this cause. Finding interest-based groups beyond your work will help you build meaningful connections and build community.

This has been the most useful strategy in my career. While my work centers on creating evidence-based, inclusive workplace strategies and teaching students, I make time for writing about issues that affect the autistic community. Most of my writing focuses on educating mainstream leaders and managers about neurodiversity inclusion in the workplace. More recently, I've also created a LinkedIn group, Neurodivergent (non)Networking, to provide a judgment-free space for neurodivergent professionals to discuss work-related issues, brainstorm strategies, and seek advice.

Office politics are hard. But know that you can be your best ally.

In every organization, there are politics. In the autistic community, we all have stories about bosses and colleagues who deceive and scapegoat us or bully and manipulate us into doing their work. While this can be emotionally draining, understand that not all politics are dirty. Sometimes, influence can be used honestly and to the benefit of all. For example, you can improve inclusion practices by forming alliances with people from different backgrounds and identities — one positive way to gain and use influence.

On a more personal level, be anchored in who you are. Know your goals and your values. Understand your vulnerabilities. If you have a hard time reading peoples' body language or motives, a trusted mentor could help. Listening, observing, and analyzing inconsistencies in coworker behaviors can also help you identify the "hidden" patterns of interactions. If politics are exhausting, make sure to pick your battles — focus on issues that impact the quality of your performance and your work goals.

Lastly, give people the benefit of the doubt. It is tempting to ascribe evil motives to people we don't understand, especially if others have done it to you often and unfairly. However, it is rarely productive. Remember that non-autistic people may have just as much trouble reading you, so try to practice kindness toward yourself and toward them. But if your kindness is not reciprocated and you're in a toxic environment, know that it's not your fault.

You deserve better, and it is not disloyal to challenge or leave an abusive situation. That is you being loyal to the person who very much needs your allyship: yourself.

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