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WORKING WITH US YOUR NEURODIVERGENT COLLEAGUES

THE NEURODIVERGENT BRAIN

The human mind is wired in a variety of ways— not surprising, since there are more than seven billion people on Earth. Scientists understand a lot about how the human brain functions, but they are far from putting it all together. One of the areas scientists are attempting to fully understand is neurodiversity, which includes a range of brain function differences and behavioral traits that vary from person to person. The term neurodiversity is used especially in the context of autism spectrum disorder (ASD), which is our focus here, and it refers to variations in the human brain regarding sociability, learning, attention, mood, and other mental functions. Other types of neurodiversity include Asperger's syndrome, dyslexia, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). We know that genetics play a role in autism, but it remains unclear whether ASD is caused by rare mutations with major effects, or by rare multigene interactions of common genetic variants.

"The world needs different kinds of minds to work together."

—Dr. Temple Grandin

BENEFITS OF NEURODIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

Regardless of the biological mechanisms involved, because the neurodiverse brain is wired in an atypical way, we bring many benefits to the workplace that help LLNL execute its mission. For example, many tasks that neurotypical individuals find difficult, such as categorizing, and analyzing systems to find solutions to problems, come more easily to us. We are often skilled at solving complex problems such as mathematical formulas because logic is a highly valued trait within the neurodiverse community. We have an amazing capacity to focus on whatever captures our attention, making us particularly detail-oriented. We crave certainty and stability, and therefore it is common for us to be skilled in recognizing patterns, as well as deviations from those patterns in complex data. We excel in technical roles such as computer programming or data science. A team that includes neurotypical and neurodiverse individuals can achieve so much more than a neurotypical-only team because we bring variety in our approach to a problem, which means there is a greater chance in coming up with different possible solutions.

HOW TO WORK WITH NEURODIVERSE STAFF

Sensitivity to bright lights

Ask your facilities manager to reduce the lighting in the employee's workspace

Sensitivity to noise

Provide headphones to block noise or if possible, provide the employee with his/her own office. (supervisors)

Anxiety in new situations

Explain the new situation in advance

Anxiety when the routine or environment changes

Explain in advance any expected, upcoming work changes. For unexpected changes that occur, explain the situation immediately

Difficulty with subtle work instructions

Provide explicit instructions on work performance roles and standards; give clear training on tasks

Difficulty with subtle language nuances or indirect communication

Use direct language; consider providing a special needs assistant to convey and interpret messages

Difficulty with maintaining eye contact

Make gentle eye-contact, and occasionally break contact briefly every 5–15 seconds. Relax your gaze, and (when possible) keep the conversation light and easy

Difficulty in social settings

Pair the neurodiverse employee with a colleague who has been at the Lab longer

There's no legal obligation for neurodiverse employees to inform co-workers about their condition, and some prefer to keep it private. Some individuals may even be unaware that they are neurodiverse. The goal is to create an environment where diversity and inclusion are valued. We will then be more likely to feel comfortable disclosing our condition and our needs in the workplace.

Neurodiverse individuals are unique employees, just like neurotypical people. Everyone engaged in a work project with neurodiverse individuals should be familiar with some common characteristics and conditions. However, they should not expect all neurodiverse employees to have the same strengths and weaknesses. Working with other people can be difficult for anyone; working with neurodiverse employees can be more challenging, since we tend to think quite differently from our neurotypical peers. For example, we might have difficulty processing new information and navigating in new environments. As a result, we may encounter many stressful situations that challenge our ability to self-regulate our state of being, which in turn, affects our ability to perform at our best. On the left are some challenges that neurodiverse employees may face and tips on how supervisors and co-workers can mitigate the difficulties.

One of the biggest challenges that we may face whenever we enter a new environment is how we ought to conduct ourselves. We can learn how to do the technical parts of the job from a briefing and can research some of the responsibilities on our own. However, without the help of someone showing us the social intricacies of being an employee, our ability to contribute to the success of the program may be limited. Fortunately, with the right amount of acknowledgement (both in technical work and social activities), you will find that we can offer a return on your investment, with interest.



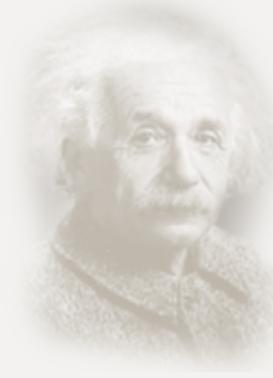
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

prolific and influential composer of the classical era



Charles Darwin

naturalist, geologist, and biologist



RECRUITING NEURODIVERSE STAFF

Neurodiverse individuals can face many obstacles when seeking employment, beginning with the job description and application. Many job descriptions are written to target individuals with a wide-ranging skillset; however, there is also value in hiring people with specialized, deeper skills. To help all individuals thrive under their leadership, it would be beneficial for managers to think about each employee's strengths and challenges, including their preferred channel of communication, how they would be most effective in their workspace, and other preferences.

Supervisors can identify job categories that would benefit from neurodiverse individuals and craft job descriptions to include these candidates. They can also build a recruiting pipeline and track progress. The neurodiversity community has a lot to offer; however, we will not be able to maximize our potential without management's effort to nurture a successful inclusion workforce.

Matthew "understands technical concepts... develops creative solutions when hitting obstacles."

—Mentor Jessica Chapman on Matthew Bobbitt's performance in support of the cybersecurity organization

David "turned out to be a natural data manager... he became a full member of the team."

—Mentor Jim Doggett speaking about David Levin's performance in the Environmental Restoration Division of O&B



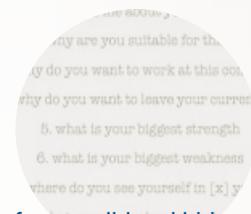
Use nontraditional, non-interview-based assessment and training processes

Arrange comfortable gatherings in which neurodiverse job candidates can demonstrate their abilities in casual interactions with company manager



Identify jobs that are well-suited to neurodivergent strengths

Examples are complex problem solving, focus, and attention to detail



Depart from traditional hiring processes

Keep interview questions focused on the job and task, and expect an interview that might not always "flow" perfectly



Participate in professional development and training

Get new ideas for both recruiting and working with neurodiverse colleagues

Albert Einstein
theoretical physicist



Temple Grandin

changed the livestock industry with her unique insights into animal psychology



John Elder Robison

author of the 2007 memoir "Look Me in the Eye," detailing his life with undiagnosed Asperger's syndrome and savant abilities

HELPFUL RESOURCES



This report was written by **Matthew Bender**, a 2019 neurodivergent LLNL summer intern

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www.askearn.org • Provides employers with strategies in recruiting and retaining neurodiverse individuals. Information on their website includes innovative interviewing techniques that are conducive to assessing the skills of neurodivergent candidates; publications on inclusion; and other resources.
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www.rceb.org • One of 21 community-based regional centers under contract with the California Department of Developmental Services. RCEB works in partnership with individuals and agencies to plan and coordinate services and support for people with developmental disabilities, family members, and community leaders in the Alameda and Contra Costa counties.
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www.auticon.us • An international information and communication technology consulting firm that exclusively employs adults on the autism spectrum as information and communication technology consultants. LLNL hiring managers could adopt some of Auticon's job recruitment processes; for example, informal chats with candidates, skills assessment, and preparation workshops.
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www.askjan.org • Helps people with disabilities enhance their employability, and shows employers how to capitalize on the value and talent that people with disabilities add to the workplace through one-on-one consulting, both on the phone and online.
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www.peatworks.org • A program that promotes the employment of people with disabilities through the development, adoption, and promotion of accessible technology policy.
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www.dor.ca.gov • Administers vocational rehabilitation services to individuals seeking employment and provides support to independent living centers throughout the state.
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www.neurodiversityhub.org • Provides programs to support neurodivergent students to become work-ready and build connections with organizations that value their talents.
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www.eastbayinnovations.org • A private, non-profit organization providing services to people throughout Alameda County.
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healthservices-int.llnl.gov • LLNL Health Services provides neurodiversity support for all LLNL employees.

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