



Embracing Neurodiversity at Work

UNLEASHING AMERICA'S LARGEST
UNTAPPED TALENT POOL

Jessica Lee and Matthew Leger

APRIL 2024

A M E R I C A N E N T E R P R I S E I N S T I T U T E

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Contents

Foreword..... iii

Executive Summary 1

I. Understanding Neurodiversity and the Neurodivergent Workforce..... 3

II. Neurodiversity in the Workplace: Opportunities and Barriers 7

III. Crucial Steps in Advancing Neurodiversity Inclusion in the Workplace 12

IV. The Role of Policy and Government in Supporting the Neurodivergent Workforce 16

V. Conclusion 22

About the Authors 23

Acknowledgments 23

Appendix A 24

Appendix B..... 25

Notes 29

Foreword

All our labor data seem to point in the same direction: For the near future, and I'd argue even the more distant future, one of the biggest constraints on economic growth will likely be a shortage of workers. A growing gross domestic product is possible only if we have the people businesses need to build and deliver the goods and services consumers want. With declining fertility, cratering public support for immigration, and an explosion of retirees (if retirees can be said to explode!), the sometimes-hidden importance of people as the economy's foundation is pushing into the foreground of our thinking.

Labor market shortages are already prompting extraordinary efforts to find untapped sources of talent. The tens of millions of Americans with criminal records who often find themselves excluded from employment, the millions of American men who have withdrawn from work, and people with various disabilities continue to struggle to find their place in the world of work, even though we literally can't do without them.

This report focuses on this last group and especially the neurodivergent—people who, because of how their brains perceive and process information, often find themselves out of sync in social settings, including the workplace. Rarely is this a matter of intelligence. Many living with autism have normal or above-normal IQs, and many have used their raw ability to develop extraordinary talents. What holds them back from work is a lack of social fluidity, the inability to access, understand, and respond to the day-to-day patterns of social engagement. These social skills, which most of us rarely even stop to

consider, are often opaque to the neurodivergent, a kind of mind reading to which they lack access and a stumbling block to social and work participation and advancement.

This is a personal matter for me. My son, Isaac, has autism. Note, I didn't say he was "autistic," which would suggest that his neurodivergent brain was the sum of who he is as a person. He's a smart, funny, insightful, loving young man who is just now, at 22, taking his first tentative steps into the world of work. We have been blessed that these steps are in Northern Virginia, a community that has provided generous services to support his development and that is populated with employers who value his diligence and cooperative nature. Together, Isaac and his employers are working hard to find ways to access his gifts, talents, and energies, partially because they see the business value in them.

The purpose of this report is to provide readers, whether policymakers or employers, with the most recent research on effective practices and needed reforms to improve employment opportunities for neurodivergent populations. The authors bring a deep personal commitment to the topic and keen understanding of what works (and what doesn't) and why. The report builds practical knowledge from the ground up, providing a starting point for talent-hungry employers seeking to access this labor pool by building the stronger, more inclusive workplaces that competitive businesses need.

—Brent Orrell, Senior Fellow,
American Enterprise Institute

Executive Summary

Since 2020, workforce challenges have defined the US economy. From a shrinking working-age population to persistent labor shortages, worker disengagement, and an ever-widening skills gap, employers are struggling to find and retain talent. Never in American history have employers contended with this complex mix of converging forces. In these difficult times, it is tempting to cultivate talent using familiar tactics or throw in the towel and exclaim that no one wants to work anymore. However, in doing so, we risk overlooking a vast, readily available, and untapped talent pool—the neurodivergent workforce.

The neurodivergent workforce encompasses working-age adults with neurological and developmental conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism spectrum disorder (ASD), dyslexia, and dyspraxia, among other conditions. The term “neurodiversity” denotes the vast spectrum of human minds and neurocognitive styles, and the neurodiversity-at-work movement is about building awareness of, acceptance of, and appreciation for a diversity of minds. From the laser-like focus and attention to detail of an individual with autism to the limitless creativity of someone with ADHD, neurodiversity has been found to drive innovation and productivity in organizations worldwide.

Collectively, neurodivergent people make up about 15 to 20 percent of the total population, but despite their talents, research has shown that they often face significant barriers to employment and economic mobility. For example, by one estimate, 85 percent of adults with ASD are unemployed, and many of those who do have jobs are considered underemployed, meaning they work in professions that fail to use their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Unemployment and underemployment of the neurodiverse population is a waste of human potential that costs the US economy and taxpayers billions in lost productivity and outlays for Social Security disability payments and Medicaid. At a time when

out-of-the-box thinking is crucial for organizations seeking to close workforce gaps, neglecting this talent pool leaves productivity, innovation, and opportunity on the table.

This problem is so pervasive in the US economy because traditional organizational structures, work cultures, and business models have often overlooked neurodiversity’s value. However, over the past decade, a small but growing group of companies including Dell, Microsoft, and SAP, as well as government agencies in the US and Australia, have begun to embrace neurodiversity. However, before employers and the broader economy can reap neurodiversity’s benefits, it is important to consider how systemic and cultural barriers continue to prevent neurodivergent workers from accessing economic opportunities.

Today, the neurodivergent workforce is still deeply misunderstood, underserved, and underused by employers and the broader workforce system. To address these gaps, our research dives into this crucial issue to help employers and governments understand the opportunities and challenges of building work environments that empower neurodivergent individuals’ unique strengths.

Methodology

This report is divided into five parts. The first section provides an overview of neurodiversity and a brief history of the neurodiversity-at-work movement. The second section outlines the opportunities and challenges of creating a neuro-inclusive workplace, and the third section provides guidance to employers for advancing neurodiversity in their organizations. The fourth section provides an overview of the policies and government programs in place to support neurodivergent workers, discusses their benefits and shortfalls, offers recommendations for policymakers,

and highlights areas for future research. The fifth section is the conclusion.

This research is based on an extensive literature review of academic studies, industry research, case studies, and thought leadership from practitioners in workforce development, business leadership, human resources, and neurodiversity inclusion. We conducted qualitative interviews with 10 neurodivergent workers in the US and six hiring managers or business executives with experience directly managing neurodivergent employees or leading neurodiversity-at-work programs. These interviews' purpose was to holistically understand neurodivergent workers' everyday experiences and the challenges their employers face in creating more inclusive work environments.

Inclusion Level Setting

Before we dive into the findings of the research, it is important to understand the following:

- Every neurodivergent individual has a different lived experience, and this report will not reflect all lived experiences.

- Neurodivergence includes a wide diversity of individual brain-function and behavioral traits and various conditions, some of which are considered disabilities.
- This report uses person-first and identity-first language to reflect preferences in the disability and neurodiversity communities and advocacy groups. We acknowledge neurodivergence's unique and individualized impacts.
- This report explores the concept, practice, and applicability of neurodiversity inclusion in the US in 2024. Some research may include colloquialisms and phrasing that does not always hold the same meaning across cultures. As more awareness and normalized conversations about neurodiversity emerge, these terms will inevitably change to better reflect neurodiverse people's experiences.

I. Understanding Neurodiversity and the Neurodivergent Workforce

Coined by sociologist Judy Singer in her 1998 thesis “Neurodiversity: The Birth of an Idea,” “neurodiversity” describes the variation in human experiences in different aspects of life, such as work, school, and social relationships.¹ This concept elevated the neurodiversity paradigm, which “suggests that, because neurological differences are normal and have existed throughout human history, they should be respected, understood, and supported, rather than pathologized or viewed as disordered.”² This launched a movement to change perceptions and attitudes toward neurodivergent people, mainly those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Today, “neurodiversity” is most often used to describe people with neurological or developmental differences.³ However, as awareness of and normalized conversations about neurodiversity emerge, the terminology is continuously evolving.⁴ For example, the narrative is changing to support the notion that “neurodiversity” includes both neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals and that the differences in how everyone’s brains work should be recognized and celebrated.

The neurodiversity awareness movement is rooted in the disability rights movement of the late 20th century. In the 1970s, disability activists challenged the medical model of disability, which viewed it as a medical problem needing treatment.⁵ Instead, they argued that disability and neurodivergence should be viewed as a natural variation in human experience.⁶ This shift in perspective led to the emergence of the social model of disability, which views disability in the context of the interaction between an individual’s impairment and the environment.⁷ The social model “identifies discrimination as the primary barrier facing people with

disabilities in their desire for full social participation, and it proposes civil rights strategies as the proper policy response to that barrier,” emphasizing the importance of accommodating people with disabilities and integrating them into the mainstream environment and social fabric.⁸

With the neurodiversity awareness movement and rise of workforce inclusion and well-being programs, a small but fast-growing group of international business leaders slowly began to embrace neurodiversity in the workplace. In the early to mid-2010s, some big-name technology companies such as Autodesk, Dell, Microsoft, and SAP launched their first neurodiversity hiring initiatives, and the neurodiversity-at-work movement was born.

Over the past few years, more organizations outside the technology sector, including in banking, finance, and insurance, as well as government and national defense agencies worldwide, have started to adopt neurodiversity-at-work programs. These programs often focus on targeted neurodiversity hiring, workplace inclusion, and employee support. However, there is still significant room to create more inclusive work environments for neurodivergent workers, as many organizations are still learning about neurodiversity and are in the early stages of incorporating this emerging concept into workplace practices.

In the broader economy, employer hesitancy to launch neurodiversity programs can be attributed to a wide range of factors, including a lack of knowledge about neurodiversity and cultural barriers that make it difficult to embrace neurodiversity at scale. However, a primary reason most organizations have yet to embrace neurodiversity is the complexity of launching dedicated programs. For example, many

Table 1. Prevalence of Neurodivergent Conditions Among US Adults

ASD	ADHD	Dyslexia
One in 36 American adults (2.8 percent) has ASD.	One in 22 American adults (4.6 percent) has ADHD.	Between 3 and 7 percent of Americans have dyslexia.

Source: P. M. Dietz et al., “Key Findings: CDC Releases First Estimates of the Number of Adults Living with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the United States,” US Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, April 7, 2022, <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/autism/features/adults-living-with-autism-spectrum-disorder.html>; US Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, National Institute of Mental Health, “Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder,” <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd>; Jack M. Fletcher et al., *Learning Disabilities: From Identification to Intervention*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2019); Richard K. Wagner et al., “The Prevalence of Dyslexia: A New Approach to Its Estimation,” *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 53, no. 5 (September–October 2020): 354–65, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0022219420920377>; Robin L. Peterson and Bruce F. Pennington, “Developmental Dyslexia,” *Lancet* 379, no. 9830 (May 26, 2012): 60198–96, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22513218>; and Margaret J. Snowling and Monica Melby-Lervåg, “Oral Language Deficits in Familial Dyslexia: A Meta-Analysis and Review,” *Psychological Bulletin* 142, no. 5 (May 2016): 498–545, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26727308>.

organizations often have legal concerns about launching neurodiversity hiring programs, fearing lawsuits over the mishandling of health data or discrimination toward employees hired through these programs. Furthermore, creating an inclusive environment involves culture and behavior change, such as helping employees understand and become comfortable with other cognitive styles and ways of interacting or communicating. Employees must understand, for instance, that a job candidate’s or colleague’s inability to make direct eye contact in an interview may stem from sensory processing conditions that are difficult for them to control.

The Neurodivergent Workforce: A Current View

Scientists and researchers have made strides in recent years and improved practices to diagnose neurological and developmental conditions in youth and adults more quickly and accurately. With these advances, the National Institute of Health estimated in 2023 that 15 to 20 percent of the world’s population (between one in seven and one in five people) exhibits some form of neurodivergence, which would amount to nearly 67 million Americans based on 2020 census data.⁹ Table 1 highlights a few examples

of neurodivergent conditions and their prevalence among the US adult population.

Note that several factors limit our understanding of the neurodivergent population, including unclear or varying definitions of neurodiversity, underreporting, underdiagnosis, co-occurrence of conditions, misdiagnosis of conditions, and overlap with mental health challenges. (Many individuals with neurodivergent conditions also suffer from mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, and mood disorders.)¹⁰ Additionally, neurodivergent individuals face significant disparities in access to care, testing, and diagnostics across the United States, which leads to demographic and socioeconomic disparities in access to mental and physical health support, as well as economic opportunity.¹¹

There are also significant gender disparities in diagnostic testing. Due to various factors, women’s and girls’ neurodivergence presents differently from men’s and boys’, which suggests “some autistic females may be missed by current diagnostic procedures.”¹² As a result, the reported prevalence of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) in America is higher for males (5.4 percent) than females (3.2 percent).¹³ Until these gender gaps in diagnostic testing are addressed, we cannot accurately gauge the scope of neurodivergence in America.

Given what we do know about these conditions' prevalence today, everyone reading this report is highly likely to know or socialize with someone who is neurodivergent, whether they are a family member, friend, peer, or coworker. Often, however, neurodivergence is not apparent, and it is therefore unseen. (A person with physical disabilities is often visibly disabled, but someone with a neurodivergent condition is not). Because neurodivergence is often hidden and many neurodivergent individuals either choose not to disclose or are unaware that they have a neurological or developmental condition, the size of the neurodivergent US workforce is unclear.

Further, despite a growing number of employers launching and executing neurodiversity hiring programs, the reality for many neurodivergent people is far from ideal. Research shows a varied unemployment rate of 30–40 percent for neurodivergent individuals, roughly eight times the rate for individuals without a disability (3.9 percent), according to the Werth Institute for Entrepreneurship and Innovation's Center for Neurodiversity and Employment.¹⁴ Additional studies on adults with ASD have found that unemployment rates are as high as 85 percent,¹⁵ and underemployment is significant, meaning that many employees with ASD have skill sets and experience levels above those required to do their current job.

Encouragingly, there are signs that employment rates for neurodivergent workers are on the rise, though there is still significant room to improve. In 2023, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that the labor force participation rate of Americans with disabilities had increased to 23.1 percent (up from 20.5 percent in 2022) and the employment-to-population ratio to 21.3 percent (up from 17.9 percent in 2020).¹⁶ By comparison, persons without a disability have a labor force participation rate of 67.8 percent and an employment-to-population ratio of 65.4 percent.¹⁷

Workplaces are embracing neurodivergent job candidates at a time when the rate of neurodivergent adults entering the workforce is increasing. In 2019, Drexel University researchers estimated that approximately 700,000 to one million youth on the autism

spectrum would turn 18 in the next 10 years, nearly double the number of youth with ASD who experts previously believed were entering the workforce every year.¹⁸

Key Drivers Advancing the Neurodiversity-at-Work Movement

Today, the momentum toward acceptance of neurodivergent employees is growing. Several key macroeconomic drivers are advancing the discussion around neurodiversity in the workplace, including those detailed below.

The Pandemic-Induced Rise of Remote Work and Workplace Transformation. In the past five years, a global pandemic, rapid technological advancement, and changing work settings catalyzed several significant workplace transformations.¹⁹ These unique circumstances provided an opportunity to redefine work fundamentally—when, where, and how it is done and, importantly, *by whom* it is done. A predominant factor in this change is the growing recognition that every individual has unique and specific processes and working styles.

This realization was reinforced during the initial COVID-19 lockdowns in March 2020, when employees transitioned to working from home overnight.²⁰ Many neurodivergent employees found that remote and asynchronous work options greatly benefited them, along with much of the neurotypical workforce.²¹ Greater exposure to and experimentation with different ways of working over the past few years have encouraged businesses to accept diverse learning, working, and communication styles—which is fundamental to embracing neurodiversity.

Changing Workforce Demographics. Declining birth rates in the US and major demographic and population shifts are leading to labor and talent shortages (i.e., a tight labor market) countrywide and across sectors.²² These demographic shifts and talent shortages have led business leaders to shift their talent strategies (including by launching dedicated

neurodiversity hiring programs), invest heavily in talent retention and support initiatives, and tap diverse subsegments of the labor force that they traditionally overlooked (as the increased rates of disability employment show.)²³ Employers interviewed for this study said their organizations have recently begun to recognize the untapped potential of neurodivergent talent and just how common neurodivergence is in their workplaces. As a result, many employers are pushing for greater investments in their organizations' neurodiversity inclusion programs.

The Shift Toward Skills-Based Hiring. Growing skill and talent gaps are challenging employers across sectors. For example, in STEM and manufacturing, 70 percent of employers worldwide recently reported that they are having difficulty filling open positions.²⁴ In response, companies have started to reevaluate traditional hiring methods that often overemphasize or favor candidates with strong social skills, even when other skills are more important to the job. To improve recruitment and hiring and close skill gaps, employers are shifting toward skills-based hiring and employee development. For example, companies have started to replace part of the interview process with skills-based assessments in which job candidates must demonstrate their ability to do the work as the job posting describes.²⁵ This has given candidates with less social fluency in oral communication or with introverted personalities (which are common among neurodivergent job seekers) a more level playing field in the hiring process.

The Increased Importance of Human, Non-cognitive Skills in the Workplace. The rise of AI and automation in workplaces worldwide is rapidly changing the supply and demand for technical and human, noncognitive skills. As routine tasks and specialized skills become increasingly automated, human skills like creativity, problem-solving, and critical and analytical thinking become more important in workers. In fact, according to a 2023 study by IBM, human skills are fast eclipsing technical skills as most important for workplace success—completely flipping findings from IBM's 2016 version of the same study, which showed that technical or STEM-related skills were most important.²⁶ This shift toward human skills has led more companies to adopt neurodiversity-at-work programs in search of workers with these highly valuable skills.

Moving forward, AI's future impacts on jobs and skills are one of the biggest unknowns for all workers, whether neurotypical or neurodivergent. Based on the technology's trajectory, AI could help democratize certain skills, supporting the inclusion of neurodivergent workers. For instance, one recent study found that AI can be trained to help people and workers manage interpersonal skill deficits. Another study showed progress toward enhancing the machine-based "theory of mind" characteristics of AI, which make AI capable of recognizing body language and emotional reactions in humans. These advancements may prove helpful to neurodivergent individuals navigating social situations.²⁷

However, as the skills bias increases, employment may become more difficult for the lower skilled or skill impaired. Further research on this topic is vitally important.

II. Neurodiversity in the Workplace: Opportunities and Barriers

This section outlines the leading opportunities that neurodiversity presents for employers and the leading barriers they must overcome to take advantage of those opportunities.

Opportunities

Organizations committed to creating and nurturing an inclusive environment for neurodivergent workers are well positioned to realize important benefits, including those workers' unique perspectives and specialized skills, distinct competitive and strategic advantages, increased productivity and efficiency, and increased employee engagement, retention, and sense of dignity.

Unique Perspectives and Specialized Skills.

Neurodivergent individuals can bring unique skills and abilities that have been shown to foster a culture of creativity and innovation. Temple Grandin, a well-known advocate for individuals with ASD, has emphasized the importance of recognizing and valuing neurodivergent individuals' distinct strengths and talents, such as attention to detail, persistence, and a strong work ethic.²⁸ Neurodivergent individuals often think differently and can bring fresh perspectives to problem-solving and ideation, and many have strengths in creative thinking, data analysis, pattern recognition, anomaly detection, and other quantitative skills.²⁹ This is especially apparent if they are given access to professional development, job coaching, and mental health providers to support them in dealing with any challenges or limitations.³⁰

Distinct Competitive and Strategic Advantages.

Companies that seek to leverage neurodivergent

employees' unique perspectives and specialized skills can realize competitive advantages. For instance, the National Institute of Economic and Social Research has found that companies can leverage neurodivergent employees' insights to create products and services that benefit neurodivergent customers and better serve this large population.³¹ Additionally, companies have leveraged neurodiversity-at-work programs to fuel innovation and meet evolving client needs.

In fact, EY strategically leverages neurodivergent talent to support client deliverables involving emerging technologies and IT projects related to data science, AI, and cybersecurity. The company has established 19 Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence worldwide to help neurodivergent workers succeed on the job. Their efforts have been shown to produce creative solutions and rapidly execute complex projects for clients, giving the company a strategic market advantage.³²

Increased Productivity and Efficiency. Organizations like EY (noted above) and Australia's Department of Human Services (DHS) have reported marked gains in productivity, efficiency, and work quality from their neurodiversity initiatives. For example, preliminary assessments of software-testing teams at Australia's DHS show that neurodiverse teams were 30 percent more productive than non-neurodiverse teams.³³ For companies that provide the needed wraparound support systems and implement the necessary process, policy, and culture changes to empower neurodivergent colleagues, the productivity and efficiency gains can effectively offset the cost of supporting neurodiversity programs.³⁴

Increased Employee Engagement, Retention, and Sense of Dignity. When employees feel valued and supported for their unique strengths, they tend to be more engaged and loyal to their employer, leading to higher retention rates and reduced turnover costs. Additionally, when employees feel valued and appreciated as human beings, they feel a greater sense of purpose and that their work is dignified.³⁵ This is no different for neurodivergent employees. Alix Generous, professional speaker and neurodiversity advocate, notes the importance of feeling valued and appreciated as a neurodivergent individual:

When my employers have embraced me as I am, the acceptance I get when I disclose my diagnosis . . . makes me feel good about working for them. Actions and words matter; acceptance from the people I work with is the main driver of my feelings of inclusion . . . or exclusion when they don't.³⁶

Neurodivergent workers often seek stable employment opportunities to structure their lives and minimize change or disruption to their daily routines. When they find a good opportunity, particularly in an organization that explicitly values neurodiversity's benefits, they tend to stay in their roles or at their companies for extended periods.³⁷ These retention benefits can also extend to neurotypical workers. In fact, neurotypical individuals interviewed for this study who were caregivers or parents of neurodivergent children frequently noted how proud they are to work at companies that invest in neurodiversity-at-work programs, saying they also feel seen and valued for the contributions of those they care for.

Barriers

While embracing neurodiversity can benefit employers, they must overcome several significant cultural and organizational barriers to realize those benefits. Many employers and managers interviewed for this study said investing in neurodiversity and tackling these challenges are well worth it, but overcoming

the barriers requires significant, sustained long-term investment and a commitment to continuous learning and evolution. According to one manager,

Neurodiversity inclusion requires more than just hiring more neurodivergent people. To realize the measurable gains in things like productivity and innovation, companies must really dig deep into their culture and operations, invest time and money, and make very intentional changes if they hope to realize long-term gains.³⁸

Cultural Barriers. The following are a list of cultural barriers to neurodiversity inclusion that this research identified as the most significant.

General Lack of Awareness and Understanding of Neurodiversity. Understanding neurodiversity is difficult, since the brain is one of the most intricate and least understood organs. Given this complexity, it is not surprising that a survey by Understood revealed that approximately 60 percent of Americans still feel they don't completely understand neurodivergence. Similarly, another survey of 1,000 workers in the US found that only 12 percent of neurodivergent and 5 percent of neurotypical respondents knew that one in five people are neurodivergent.³⁹ Improving the workforce's understanding of neurodiversity, accepting atypical work approaches, and normalizing and appreciating neurodivergent individuals' gifts are crucial first steps for organizations looking to create a more inclusive environment. Additionally, raising awareness of neurodiversity might reduce communication barriers and discrimination at work, which more than a third of neurodivergent workers who responded have experienced.⁴⁰

Addressing Mindset and Behavior Change. Creating a workplace that welcomes and supports neurodiverse minds requires leaders, managers, and colleagues to get comfortable doing things differently and being open to new ways of thinking and working. One neurodivergent worker with executive-level experience whom we interviewed for this study noted serious

challenges in communicating their ideas effectively in meetings with colleagues. They noted,

Communicating what is going on in my head to people whose brains work very differently is often very challenging. . . . And rather than take the time and show me respect by stepping back to ask me how I arrived at my conclusions, people often just ignore or dismiss me. I just wish my colleagues had the wherewithal to slow down and give me a chance to explain or communicate in a different way, rather than let their immediate reaction to my ideas dictate their behavior toward me in those moments.⁴¹

Several others interviewed for this study recounted many similar instances in their work experiences.

Neurodiversity inclusion requires neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals to meet in the middle and strive to understand each other's frames of reference and cognitive styles.⁴² This requires meaningful dialogue, compromise, collaboration, patience, growth, perseverance, and a robust support system. Creating connection and collaboration between neurodivergent and neurotypical workers requires a change in human behavior and a broader shift in foundational beliefs about how humans and workers should think, behave, and do their jobs, which can prove difficult for any organization. As noted by Laurel Farrer, owner of remote and distributed workplace consulting firm Distribute, "The greatest challenge is trying to change people's behaviors and foundational belief systems to make a more inclusive workplace. That's a big hill to climb, especially when people are so polarized and reactive in today's social dynamic."⁴³

People-Manager Enablement. Senior leaders can model behaviors, set priorities, and establish policies related to neurodiversity, but managers are on the front line of implementing neurodiversity-at-work programs and supporting neurodivergent colleagues in their daily jobs. Their ability to effectively support neurodivergent teammates depends entirely on the resources and support their organizations provide them, including specialized training. In general, companies often struggle to effectively equip middle management with

the training and social and emotional skills to handle the everyday human challenges of managing employees, let alone specialized training to teach them how to support neurodivergent individuals.

In fact, in a 2020 survey, the Institute of Leadership and Management found that half of managers were uncomfortable hiring neurodivergent individuals.⁴⁴ Similarly, a survey by the UK-based Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development found that 72 percent of HR professionals reported that their people-management practices did not consider neurodiversity. However, in the neurodiversity-at-work movement, we continue to hear managers say that managing neurodivergent colleagues has made them better at managing people generally. Lacking or ineffective training for managers and employees on neurodiversity (e.g., the basics of neurodiversity, how to include neurodivergent colleagues, and how to handle disability disclosures and provide workplace accommodations) threatens to undermine neuro-inclusion efforts. (A list of organizations that provide these trainings is in Table B1 under "Nonprofits, Consultancies, and Advocacy Organizations.")

Organizational Barriers. The following are the three most significant organizational barriers to neurodiversity inclusion that this research identified.

Organizational and Workforce Data Gaps. In addition to a lack of clarity around the neurodivergent workforce's size, understanding neurodiversity's prevalence in individual organizations remains a major challenge due to significant gaps in accurate and accessible data. This stems from several factors, including:

- **Data-privacy restrictions.** Health-related data, including disability data, fall under stringent regulations, such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, that restrict data access to only a few individuals in companies.
- **Disconnects in self-identification.** While companies encourage those with disabilities to self-identify, concerns about stigmas and

data misuse discourage disclosure, leading to underreporting.

- **Broad definitions of “disability.”** The broad definition of “disability” in the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) creates inconsistencies in how companies categorize and report data, further obscuring the true picture. For example, an individual who needs contact lenses can technically be classified as disabled. However, whether to publicly report the breakdown of employees with contact lenses versus those with a cognitive or physical disability is up to the company.
- **Informal support channels.** Many neurodivergent individuals rely on informal accommodations rather than a formal process, leaving their needs invisible in company data.

Inflexible Work and Organizational Structures. Building neurodiverse workplaces presents challenges, particularly in adapting and creating more flexible work and organizational structures. Typically, workplaces, workflows, and career paths are designed for the neurotypical worker, focusing on efficiency, cultural fit, and a linear career progression or work style. Most performance measurements are supposed to gauge employee performance in a range of skills (including technical skills and human or durable skills) to provide a holistic view of the employee.

However, in practice, performance evaluations are often inconsistent and rife with opportunities for human biases to affect the outcome. For example, managers commonly give higher ratings to extroverted employees with stronger social skills or employees who give themselves more favorable reviews during the process’s self-review portion.⁴⁵ This approach to performance evaluation often disadvantages neurodivergent workers, especially those with varying social and communication skills, and fails to appreciate and take advantage of the unique skill sets and knowledge they bring.

As one neurodivergent individual interviewed for this study noted,

My brain does not work in a straight line; my thought processes often branch off in different directions as I think through all of my work tasks. Sometimes it takes me longer than my peers to complete certain projects, but I always get to where I need to go, and I always bring different ideas to the table. Unfortunately, the time it takes for me to get stuff done and my perceived chaotic thinking process seem to make my managers and colleagues uneasy.⁴⁶

Companies strive for streamlined business processes that minimize room for errors, and shifting these practices to allow more flexibility and ambiguity can be difficult or uncomfortable. There is no one-size-fits-all solution for supporting neurodiverse workers, which necessitates a high level of flexibility and adaptability to individual needs and ways of working. This can be challenging for organizations to accommodate and scale. However, managers interviewed for this study frequently noted that when organizations intentionally try to leverage neurodivergent workers’ unique skills and abilities and acknowledge the value they bring to the workplace, the payoff—that is, the benefits noted in the previous section—is well worth the effort.

Lack of Wraparound Support Resources. Another obstacle in creating neuro-inclusive workplaces is the need to build support internally and devote the time, money, and human resources to ensure success. Once neurodivergent individuals transition from school to full-time employment, they often encounter a “support cliff” with limited resources available to facilitate this transition. Similarly, employers seeking to hire neurodivergent workers lack the internal skills or specialized resources to meet their unique needs (e.g., specialized coaches for neurodiversity).

When organizations lack the internal knowledge and expertise to support neurodivergent colleagues’ unique health needs and cognitive styles, neurodiversity inclusion efforts can struggle to succeed. Organizational leaders interviewed for this study noted that neuropsychologists, educational therapists, and third-party experts or consulting organizations with specialized knowledge and training on neurodiversity

helped them effectively provide wraparound supports and fill internal capability and service gaps. They noted that these services incur additional costs and can add complexity to neurodiversity-at-work

programs. However, without these investments, businesses have a much lower chance of success in incorporating neurodiverse workers.

III. Crucial Steps in Advancing Neurodiversity Inclusion in the Workplace

While the neurodiversity-at-work movement is gaining traction, many organizations are still in the early learning and discovery phases. The following are crucial short-, medium-, and long-term steps organizations can take to advance neurodiversity inclusion in the workplace.

Short-Term Steps: Implement Now

The following are steps employers can implement today to begin their neurodiversity inclusion journey.

Educate Yourself by Learning from Others. Disability:IN's Neurodiversity at Work playbooks and guides feature lessons and case studies from companies that have launched neurodiversity-at-work programs. Review these and other publicly available resources, consult with employer networks, and tap into corporate peers' knowledge to understand their workplace experiences, challenges, and best practices.

Partner with a Third Party Who Has Expertise in Neurodiversity. Partner with and rely on neurodiversity experts and consultants who have helped other organizations lead this work and who can guide your organization to start in the most meaningful way. (See the list in Table B1 under "Nonprofits, Consultancies, and Advocacy Organizations.")

Build Awareness of Neurodiversity Across the Organization. Provide neurodiversity training and resources across your organization to help leadership, managers, and employees better understand neurodiversity, associated conditions, and

the actions, language, and behaviors they can model to be more inclusive of neurodivergent colleagues. Consider in-depth training for human resources and management teams that directly support employees.

Adopt Inclusive and Universal Communication Practices. Leverage clear, multi-format communications to meet a range of cognitive processing styles and communication preferences, including written, oral, audio, visual, and interactive content and documentation.

Invest in Assistive Technologies to Level the Playing Field for Neurodivergent Workers. Embed assistive technologies in business processes, communication channels, and productivity tools. These include recording devices for meetings; note-taking, speech-to-text, and real-time-translation software; and accessibility tools, such as screen readers. Empower workers with a range of assistive technologies, regardless of their disability or disclosure status.

Medium-Term Steps: Prepare to Implement

The following are steps employers can prepare to implement in the near future to take their neurodiversity inclusion efforts to the next level.

Dedicate Resources for a Neurodiversity Pilot Initiative. Assign a dedicated person who can drive a neurodiversity pilot or initiative and partner closely with crucial stakeholders, such as the human resources and workforce inclusion teams, that support employees and provide workplace accommodations. Start by identifying jobs or departments that

may benefit from neurodivergent workers' unique skill sets, such as data analytics, data entry or processing, marketing, or other similar roles.

Appoint Neurodiversity Champions and an Executive Sponsor to Evaluate Company Policies and Establish a Neurodiversity Strategy.

Identify internal neurodiversity champions to spearhead inclusion efforts in the organization. Designate an executive sponsor to take on early pilot initiatives. In the beginning, partner with a neurodiversity consultant or expert to evaluate company policies and practices, identify opportunities to enhance inclusion for neurodivergent workers, and strategize.

Identify Organizational and Workforce Data Gaps.

Ask HR teams what disability-related data they collect, how they collect them, and how many employees have identified themselves as having a disability. Establish a clear understanding of internal data collection, metrics (if there are any), and reporting mechanisms to understand data gaps and opportunities for improving analytics and performance measurement. Consider a neurodivergent employee's experience with the current disability and accommodation reporting process and whether your company's processes and culture invite or discourage disability disclosure.

Provide Specialized Training for Managers.

Equip managers with leadership training and resources on how to have connective conversations when employees disclose a disability or request individualized accommodations to work effectively. Similarly, provide employees with resources on what to consider and how to request personalized adjustments and strategies to perform their best work.

Create a Culture of Continuous Learning and Development.

Be willing to intentionally experiment, fail, learn, and improve. In the interviews conducted for this study, particularly those with neurodivergent workers, almost no one said they expected perfection from their managers or employers. They

merely wanted their employers to listen, understand, and take action to build a supportive environment that demonstrated care for their individual success. Many interviewees acknowledged that people make mistakes along the way; they just wanted people to learn from their mistakes and try to improve. For example, many interviewees noted that how their managers reacted to and acted on their disability disclosure or responded when they made an honest mistake significantly affected their job success, satisfaction, and feelings of inclusion.

Long-Term Steps: Strategize and Plan to Implement

The following are long-term steps employers can implement when they've built up neurodiversity inclusion maturity and want to expand their efforts across the organization.

Redesign Recruitment, Hiring, and Onboarding Practices to Break Down Barriers to Entry for Neurodivergent Talent.

How organizations hire, fire, and promote must be redesigned and reconsidered from a neurodiverse-inclusive lens to enable true neurodiversity inclusion. Organizations need to rethink recruitment, hiring, and onboarding practices to break down the most significant barrier to entry for neurodivergent talent: getting hired in the first place. Companies must identify biases (e.g., giving more consideration to people with strong social skills) and ways they are inadvertently disadvantaging neurodivergent candidates or workers (e.g., by not offering a skills-based assessment to provide job candidates an opportunity to demonstrate their abilities).

Embracing skills-based hiring and clearly defining the skills that are crucial for the role are essential. A clear rubric for an employee's ability to meet those criteria can enforce these hiring changes. For example, if social skills are essential for the role, define exactly how they will be measured. If they are not important for the role, they should not be used to determine the best-fitting candidate.

Promote and Enable Work and Career Flexibility. When defining work tasks and outcomes, allow autonomy and creativity in how and where work gets done. Understand that neurodivergent workers have diverse working and communication styles that may vary from what is typical in the organization. Many neurodivergent workers interviewed for this study noted that they work best when managers describe clear, specific outcomes expected for project tasks while establishing clear guidelines for what can and cannot happen, which allows the employees to work freely within those bounds using the structure, tools, or processes that work best for them.

Enabling remote, hybrid, and flexible work arrangements as an accommodation is important for neurodiversity inclusion. Empowering workers to choose the work arrangement they are most comfortable with and function best in unveils their true skills and abilities. Consider nontraditional and flexible career pathways to promotion and career growth that align with an employee's strengths.

Use “Job Carving” to Create New, Nontraditional Work Arrangements in the Organization’s “White Spaces.” Building a workplace where neurodiverse minds can thrive requires a mindset shift. Organizations must move beyond traditional work arrangements that are focused purely on specific tasks or roles and find the white space of possibilities where there is room to experiment and define a new role from scratch. Some neurodivergent individuals can bring unparalleled creativity, problem-solving, pattern recognition, and unwavering focus to the table. By embracing these individuals' unique ways of thinking and working, organizations unlock new opportunities and competitive advantages. As noted by Bonnie Sims, executive director of medical informatics at a contract research organization in the biotech and pharmaceutical industry,

Structure is very good for an organization; you need that to ensure things get done and performance can be measured, but there is plenty of room for nuance in the white spaces of how we operate. . . . We need to actively seek those out and leverage people's unique

points of view in those areas. We need to make space within the company for people whose brains are wired differently . . . those who are on the fringes of neurodiversity.⁴⁷

To accomplish this, collaboration is key. While HR spearheads creating an inclusive environment, business leaders must actively seek out the white-space opportunities and identify roles or projects in which neurodivergent individuals can excel. Instead of focusing on limitations, use job carving techniques to identify and refine tasks that best suit neurodivergent individuals' strengths. Break down existing roles or create new ones that capitalize on their exceptional abilities in data analysis, pattern recognition, creative problem-solving, or attention to detail. This targeted approach allows individuals to flourish while contributing meaningfully to the organization's goals.

Simplify and Streamline Workplace Accommodations Processes. In a *Harvard Business Review* article, Robert D. Austin and Gary Pisano note that highly specialized work requires highly specialized minds. They suggest that accommodations are not special favors but necessary adjustments that allow all workers to perform according to their strengths.⁴⁸ Organizations must review workplace accommodation processes, consider whether employees are using those processes, and, if they are not, identify barriers preventing people from accessing accommodations.

In addition to organizations intentionally providing accommodations, neurodivergent employees should feel it is safe to formally request them. Companies should reduce disability disclosure risks and alleviate concerns by simplifying and streamlining accommodations request processes, making them easy for employees to find and follow while advertising and promoting them. Organizations should focus on reducing the administrative burden on employees, managers, and HR officers by providing training and centralized resources. They should also redesign accommodations processes leveraging human-centered design principles, emphasizing the neurodivergent employees' experience and

equipping HR with proper neurodiversity training and resources to facilitate the process collaboratively.

Provide Targeted Resources and Wraparound Support Systems. To create an inclusive environment for neurodivergent workers, organizations must provide wraparound supports that meet these employees' personal and professional needs. They can start by building a neurodiversity-focused employee

resource group to connect neurodivergent workers, build community, open a direct line of communication with leadership, and drive neurodiversity-at-work initiatives. Additionally, companies should connect neurodivergent talent with external specialized supports such as nonprofits and third-party experts (e.g., neuropsychologists, occupational therapists, and educational therapists) to fill capability gaps.

IV. The Role of Policy and Government in Supporting the Neurodivergent Workforce

The history of government policy and neurodiversity in the US workplace dates back several decades and has been shaped by several key laws and initiatives.

Key Legislation and Tax Incentives

The ADA of 1990 was a landmark piece of legislation that provided many neurodivergent employees with workplace rights and protections. For instance, the ADA prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and public places.⁴⁹ Note that there is a legal difference between self-identifying as neurodivergent and being medically diagnosed with a neurodivergent condition. This is because the ADA does not specifically list disabilities that qualify for legal protection.

Instead, the ADA defines a person with a disability as someone who (1) has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more “major life activities,” (2) has a record of such an impairment, or (3) is regarded as having such an impairment.⁵⁰

Most neurodivergent individuals have been medically diagnosed with a specific condition, and many are comorbid, with one or more conditions that the law does not classify as disabilities.⁵¹ However, two issues prevent neurodivergent workers from qualifying for ADA protections:

- **The High Cost of Diagnostic Testing.** Many individuals who believe they have a neurodivergent condition but lack a formal diagnosis often choose to self-identify as neurodivergent (or

live unsure whether they have a specific condition) because a formal diagnosis is exceptionally costly. For example, while costs can vary significantly across the US, a comprehensive ADHD exam can cost upward of \$4,500 out of pocket, and the cost of subsequent medical care (e.g., for medication and mental health support) gets added, putting diagnosis and adequate medical treatment out of reach for many.⁵² Without a formal diagnosis or medical documentation, self-identification as neurodivergent does not guarantee protection under the ADA.

- **Nondisclosure and Self-Views of Disability.** While neurodivergent conditions such as autism and ADHD can be considered disabilities under the ADA, neurodivergent individuals commonly do not disclose their diagnosis due to fears of discrimination or because they do not see themselves as having a disability.⁵³ However, employers often refuse to provide formal accommodations to employees without formal disclosure and medical documentation proving disability status. This is further complicated by the inapparent nature of neurodivergence. (For example, if an employee with an invisible disability such as ADHD asks for accommodations like noise-canceling headphones without proof that they are medically necessary, employers are not legally obligated to provide them. However, an individual in a wheelchair due to mobility challenges often does not need to disclose their disability to receive special accommodations, such as a ramp or accessible bathroom stalls, because their need is apparent—though we acknowledge that they still face barriers.

These are good examples of universally beneficial accommodations that should not require disability disclosure.)

The ADA's protection extends to the workplace, where employers must provide "reasonable accommodations"⁵⁴ to employees who formally disclose their disability (with medical documentation). In the workplace, individuals with disabilities are entitled to a timely and collaborative "interactive process."⁵⁵ However, oftentimes, neurodivergent workers feel that the process is not benefiting them and that they are a burden to the company, since the ADA allows companies to negotiate accommodations only if they do not cause "undue hardship"⁵⁶ to the business.⁵⁷

As many neurodivergent individuals interviewed for this study noted, neurodivergent workers often feel at odds with the accommodations process because accommodations are often funded by operational budgets and allocated via line management instead of being funded by a centralized company accommodation budget. This can also lead a neurodivergent employee to feel burdensome, as they would take part of the budget away from the rest of the team by claiming accommodations. Companies advancing neurodiversity inclusion in partnership with consultancies are designing accommodations processes that uphold company considerations while prioritizing the neurodivergent individual—ensuring they feel supported, trusted, and equipped to be successful while understanding that advancing inclusion is an iterative process.

Beyond the ADA, contractors for the federal government are held to the requirements in Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973,⁵⁸ which was added in 2014. This section requires federal contractors to employ qualified individuals with disabilities in at least 7 percent of their total workforce. In 2021, President Joe Biden issued Executive Order 14,035, which laid out ways to increase diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility in the federal workforce, including for neurodiverse populations.⁵⁹

Most recently, in 2023, the Biden administration issued a presidential Proclamation on World Autism

Awareness Day to recognize neurodiverse people's achievements and reiterate the administration's commitment to supporting the equal rights and dignity of all those on the autism spectrum.⁶⁰ Furthermore, the president's 2024 fiscal budget earmarks \$150 billion over the next decade to improve and expand Medicaid home care services—making it easier for people with disabilities to live, work, and participate in their communities.⁶¹

Financial and tax incentives are also in place to promote the inclusion of disabled or neurodivergent employees. The IRS regularly publishes articles outlining existing tax credits and benefits available to qualifying taxpayers, parents of children with disabilities, and other entities wishing to accommodate persons with disabilities.⁶² Deductions and credits that incentivize employers to hire and accommodate workers with disabilities include:

- **The Work Opportunity Tax Credit.** This credit incentivizes employers to hire qualified individuals from specific groups, including veterans and people with disabilities, that have historically faced significant barriers to employment. Maximum tax credits range from \$1,200 to \$9,600, depending on the employee hired, their specific disability-related needs, and the length of employment.
- **The Disabled Access Credit.** This is a non-refundable credit for small businesses that hire individuals with disabilities. Eligible small businesses that earn \$1 million or less and employ a worker with a disability receive a nonrefundable annual credit of up to \$5,000 for the purpose of providing accessibility accommodations to workers with disabilities (e.g., by paying for special accommodations and transportation).⁶³
- **The Architectural Barrier Removal Tax Deduction.** This deduction encourages businesses of all sizes to remove architectural and transportation barriers to the mobility of persons with disabilities and the elderly.⁶⁴

While federal policy and financial incentives were introduced to support neurodivergent populations and individuals with disabilities in the workplace, they have often not fully met their objectives, as these demographics' unemployment rates show. While these employer incentives may offset some costs of hiring and supporting neurodivergent employees and make hiring individuals with disabilities theoretically more attractive, they are often underused due to a lack of awareness or an insufficient understanding of how to apply them. The application processes for these incentives can be complex and require coordination with a government agency, potentially deterring employers from applying.⁶⁵ For example, strict eligibility rules and complex, confusing paperwork sometimes exclude potential beneficiaries, limiting the credits' effectiveness as an incentive for corporations.⁶⁶

The ADA has been instrumental in fostering inclusivity, providing a framework for nondiscrimination, and ensuring reasonable accommodations in the workplace. However, its effectiveness has been limited by various factors, including risk, hesitancy of individuals with disabilities to request accommodations, exploitable loopholes, a lack of stringent enforcement and effectiveness measures, and a narrow definition of "disability."⁶⁷

Most importantly, these laws and incentives do not, and cannot, address the underlying biases and stigmas that often discourage employers from hiring neurodivergent individuals and people with disabilities in the first place. Education and training to raise awareness, change perceptions, and remove barriers is required. Without these, change is unlikely in American workplaces. As a result, despite policies and incentives, the employment landscape for neurodivergent individuals and people with disabilities will remain systemically difficult until individual mindsets shift and beliefs are transformed.

Recommendations for Policymakers

To address policy shortfalls and advance neurodiversity inclusion in American workplaces, federal,

state, and local policymakers should consider the following recommendations.

Build a Neurodivergent Workforce Data Collection Mechanism Through the US Department of Labor. To accurately quantify the neurodivergent workforce, conduct research, and assess the effectiveness of policies and programs targeting this population, the US Department of Labor should implement a secure and voluntary neurodivergent workforce data collection mechanism. This mechanism, with appropriate safeguards for individual privacy, would track neurodiversity representation across industries, enable researchers and policymakers to track and measure outcomes for this segment of the workforce, and identify areas that need targeted interventions.

Overhaul Workforce Development and Vocational Rehabilitation Programs, Specifically Job Coaching and Employment Retention Programs. Nationwide, vocational rehabilitation programs are often the only public resource available to help neurodivergent adults transition to the workforce. These services are significantly underfunded compared to other disability services that are not related to employment. In fact, the US Department of Education allocated roughly \$3.7 billion to states countrywide for vocational rehabilitation,⁶⁸ while the US government allocated \$143 billion for Social Security Disability Insurance in 2022, according to the most recent data.⁶⁹ In essence, the US government spends nearly 39 times as much money on disability benefits as it does on disability employment services.

Despite the lack of investment in job training and preparation services, these programs seem effective at helping place neurodivergent workers in jobs. In fact, while success rates vary among states, 60 percent of autistic adults in the US who receive vocational rehabilitation successfully find employment.⁷⁰ However, these programs' employment sustainment and retention rates are unclear, as they are not tracked.

Given this population's high unemployment rates and anecdotal evidence from the leaders of neurodiversity consultancies interviewed for this study, it

is likely that neurodivergent adults often struggle to sustain employment following placement. In some states, such as California, job coaches work with neurodivergent individuals and employers through the employees' first 90 days on the job, but some employees are then left to their own devices or required to pay privately for more specialized coaches.⁷¹ Allowing extended support services and more flexibility in when neurodivergent workers can access job coaching and retention services could help these workers and their employers succeed—improving retention rates and reducing the cycle of neurodivergent workers reentering vocational rehabilitation services.

Additionally, vocational rehabilitation programs have succeeded mostly in getting workers with disabilities placed in low-wage jobs. However, as more employment opportunities for neurodivergent individuals grow in professional and corporate settings, vocational rehabilitation agencies and job coaches who work with disabled or neurodivergent job seekers must be reequipped to effectively place them in higher-paying, more stable jobs with prospects for upward mobility and economic self-sufficiency.

Essentially, to place neurodivergent individuals in jobs that match their skill sets and abilities, vocational rehabilitation programs need job coaching and work readiness programs aligned with professional employment opportunities that require advanced skills. Furthermore, specialized neurodiversity-focused job coaches and support structures that consider corporate workplace norms and priorities are required for the neurodivergent population to succeed.

Develop and Promote Incentives and Opportunities That Reduce Risk and Complexity and Encourage Organizations to Pursue Neurodiversity Hiring. Workforce development funding today directly supports neurodivergent individuals in their job search and related needs, primarily through vocational rehabilitation agencies. However, policymakers could advance neurodiversity employment by providing additional funding for intermediaries, nonprofits, and consulting organizations that educate and work with employers to support neurodiversity hiring. Managers must often receive education and

preparation before they feel comfortable hiring neurodivergent workers. However, existing vocational rehabilitation programs do not cover up-front consulting and training costs, creating a significant financial barrier for employers seeking to attract and retain neurodivergent workers.

By adjusting vocational rehabilitation programs to provide funding that covers a portion of these up-front costs, agencies can alleviate the risks of neurodiversity hiring. Moreover, policymakers can advance neurodiversity employment by building awareness of these incentive programs and advancing policies that simplify and streamline incentives and benefit application processes to reduce the burden on employers. For example, the German government has created a publicly funded program to support neurodivergent employee retention, which has helped move people off public assistance, kept them attached to the labor force, and generated tax revenue that has sustained the program. Estimates of the benefits of these public assistance programs vary, but research suggests that the German government has realized a net gain of about \$50,000 per person per year from these investments.⁷²

Develop a Center to Connect Employers and Employees with Crucial Resources. The federal government can serve as a resource aggregator and facilitator for employers, government agencies, academia, and workers. It can support companies, nonprofits, neurodiversity hiring consultancies, and mental health professionals to make resources more readily available to employers and workers. A crucial step will be investing in the development of a central organization or center of excellence for employers and neurodivergent workers to access educational and training resources, reach experts (e.g., neurodiversity consultants and specialists, neuropsychologists, and therapists), connect with business leaders, and share best practices and key lessons.

Establish Employer Resource Networks for Neurodivergent Talent to Bridge the “Support Cliff.” As this report noted earlier, public school systems across the United States provide significant

support to help neurodivergent children succeed in school. However, when those students graduate from the public school system and transition into adulthood, they often fall off a support cliff, as limited resources are available to help them transition to full-time employment.

There are some positive signs that the US government has recognized this challenge and is making investments to bridge the support cliff. In September 2023, the US Department of Education's Rehabilitation Services Administration issued \$199 million to advance the Pathways to Partnerships program. This funding will support 20 demonstration projects that enable

collaborative partnerships between state vocational rehabilitation agencies, state and local educational agencies, and federally funded centers for independent living to help individuals with disabilities seamlessly transition to life after high school, preparing them for independent living, competitive integrated employment and community integration.⁷³

A strong step in the right direction, the effort aims to promote economic self-sufficiency and close employment disparities for those with disabilities. Time will tell how effective such programs are.

Additionally, according to H. Luke Shaefer and Joshua Rivera in a 2020 report published by AEI, employer resource networks “are an innovative model through which local networks of employers collectively provide work support services to their entry-level workforces, with the goal of enhancing productivity and retention.”⁷⁴ While there are areas for improvement, these programs can be a model for resource networks that support and advance early-career workers with neurodivergent conditions and provide resources that increase those workers' chances of finding and sustaining meaningful employment.

Establish Infrastructure to Support Education-to-Career Pathways for the Neurodivergent Workforce. The US Chamber of Commerce's Talent Pipeline Management (TPM) program can be a model

for future neurodiversity hiring initiatives. TPM is designed to “advance authentic employer leadership in building high-performing talent pipelines” by providing “employers and their education and workforce development partners with strategies and tools to co-design talent supply chains that connect learners and workers to jobs and career advancement opportunities.”⁷⁵ Similarly, California's Department of Rehabilitation recently funded a state (Neuro)diversity in Insurance Program to train neurodivergent job candidates for entry-level positions in the insurance industry.⁷⁶ The state incentivized insurance agencies and companies to hire directly from the program by providing funding to create work experiences and to train hiring managers and teams.

By expanding programs like (Neuro)diversity in Insurance and TPM that are intentionally designed to build a pipeline of neurodiverse talent across the US, policymakers can build purposeful and sustainable neurodivergent supply chains for talent that continuously funnel workers into open positions based on local supply of and demand for skills. This could significantly reduce the unemployment and underemployment challenges facing the neurodivergent population and shrink talent and labor shortages that hamper the nation's economy.

Promote and Advance Skills-Based Hiring. Federal workforce development programs that promote skills-based hiring can advance neurodiversity inclusion by moving employers toward a more equitable hiring approach that gives workers greater opportunity to demonstrate their skills. Furthermore, skills-based hiring can improve economic productivity by boosting “match quality” for jobs (the measure of how well an employee's skills, experience, and interest align with their job's requirements).⁷⁷

Partner with Industry and Academia to Research the Neurodivergent Workforce Further. Many organizations have launched and studied neurodiversity-at-work programs, including JPMorgan Chase & Co. and Australia's DHS, as noted above. However, focused empirical and academic research on the impact of neurodiversity initiatives

is generally lacking. Few studies have focused on the broader neurodivergent workforce, which poses a significant barrier to understanding and addressing these workers' needs.

To address the lack of academic literature, new journals such as the *Journal of Neurodiversity* have been established, and several universities, including Stanford University and the University of North

Carolina, have research centers focused on neurodiversity. The federal government can help close research gaps by funding and partnering with higher education institutions, think tanks, employers across industries, neurodiversity consultants and experts, and researchers to evaluate neurodiversity-at-work programs and identify best practices for hiring and supporting this unique population.

V. Conclusion

Embracing neurodiversity is about more than inclusion for its own sake; it is a strategic imperative for American employers and the US economy. This vast, untapped labor pool has long faced systemic and cultural barriers to employment, keeping it on the sidelines of the workforce for too long. In an economy defined by workforce challenges, the time has never been better to think outside the box about talent recruitment, retention, and human potential.

While embracing neurodiversity requires breaking down rigid systems and challenging preconceived notions, the rewards for businesses are undeniable. With the necessary changes, millions of neurodivergent Americans may finally be able to showcase their true skills and abilities and achieve economic mobility. The time to embrace neurodiversity in the workplace is now.

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Appendix A

Key Terms

- **Neurodivergent.** Of an individual: Having a neurological or cognitive variation; not neurotypical.⁷⁸
- **Neurodiverse.** Of a group: Having neurological or cognitive variations, such as autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, or traumatic brain injuries.⁷⁹
- **Neurodiversity.** Diversity of minds. This term implies that neurological differences are just as crucial to the human genome as any other genetic variation or developmental condition is. It suggests that conditions like autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder are not abnormal but rather part of humanity's natural cognitive diversity.⁸⁰ Most importantly, the neurodiversity inclusion movement calls for an appreciation of cognitive diversity as an important dimension in advancing human well-being and progress.
- **Neurotypical.** Having brain functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of "typical."⁸¹

Common Neurodivergent Conditions⁸²

- **Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.** A neurodevelopmental condition characterized by difficulty paying attention, excessive activity, or difficulty controlling certain behaviors.
- **Autism Spectrum Disorder.** A developmental condition that affects communication and behavior and includes a broad range of symptoms and skills.
- **Dyscalculia.** A learning difference that impairs an individual's ability to understand and manipulate numbers.
- **Dysgraphia.** A learning difference that affects a person's handwriting ability and fine motor skills.
- **Dyslexia.** A learning difference characterized by difficulty reading due to problems identifying speech sounds and learning how they relate to letters and words.
- **Dyspraxia.** A neurological condition that affects an individual's ability to plan and process motor tasks.
- **Dysnomia.** A condition characterized by trouble recalling or retrieving words from memory.
- **Tourette's Syndrome.** A neurological condition characterized by repetitive, stereotyped, involuntary movements and vocalizations called tics.

Appendix B

Table B1. Organizations Embracing Neurodiversity Around the World

Nonprofits, Consultancies, and Advocacy Organizations	
Name	Brief Overview
Disability:IN	Disability:IN is a pioneering nonprofit for global disability inclusion with a network of over 500 corporations. It expands opportunities for people with disabilities across enterprises.
Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion	The Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion promotes inclusive employment practices for individuals with disabilities.
Grit & Flow	Grit & Flow uses consulting psychology and organizational psychology to increase diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging through inclusive practices and cultures.
Integrate	Integrate advises organizations on neurodiversity inclusion and talent management.
Job Accommodation Network	The Job Accommodation Network “provides free, confidential technical assistance about job accommodations and the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act].”
Neurodiversity in the Workplace	Neurodiversity in the Workplace “connect[s] highly qualified neurodivergent talent to career opportunities with inclusive employers. As a business consultancy, we design, implement, and sustain neurodiversity hiring programs with partner organizations seeking a more diverse, equitable, and innovative workforce.”
Neurodiversity Pathways	Neurodiversity Pathways empowers neurodivergent individuals through education and career opportunities.
NeuroTalent Works	NeuroTalent Works advances neurodiversity inclusion in the workplace through consulting, training, and connecting employers to neurodivergent talent while helping neurodiverse individuals find and excel in meaningful employment.
Potentia	Potentia delivers solutions to workforce challenges through Spectrum Training, Recruitment, and Support, its neurodiversity training and recruitment program, and Empower, its workforce engagement and retention program.
Rangam	“SourceAble is Rangam’s autism, neurodiversity, and disability hiring solution providing a collaborative, holistic framework designed to develop people, create inclusionary processes, and foster a culture of belonging.”
Specialisterne	Specialisterne creates employment opportunities for people on the autism spectrum.

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Zavikon	“We provide recruitment, workplace readiness, and job accommodation identification and advocacy for individuals with disabilities or those who are neurodivergent. We provide education and guidance to employers to support a successful employment relationship.”
Universities and Research Organizations	
Name	Brief Overview
Birkbeck, University of London, Centre for Neurodiversity at Work	The center “undertakes cutting edge research to enhance and support ethical, impactful organisational practice . . . through fostering collaborations between scientific research and psychologists in practice, influenced by the priorities of neurominority employees.”
National Institute of Economic and Social Research	The National Institute of Economic and Social Research publishes research on policies and practices to help people with neurological conditions integrate into mainstream employment.
Stanford University, School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Neurodiversity Project	The Neurodiversity Project is a special initiative of Stanford University’s Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences.
University of Connecticut, Werth Institute for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, Center for Neurodiversity and Employment Innovation	“The Center for Neurodiversity and Employment Innovation provides neurodivergent . . . students with specialized 1–1 coaching around pursuing internship and employment opportunities with organizations who understand and support neurodiversity.”
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Autism Research Center	The center “brings together world renowned research expertise to address autism’s greatest challenges. This integrated approach promises to deliver transformative research that has the potential to greatly enhance the quality of life of individuals with autism and their families, impacting outcomes across the lifespan.”
University of Washington, Information School and Institute on Human Development and Disability, Autism Center	<p>“The research program at the UW [University of Washington] Autism Center collaborates with scientists from a variety of disciplines in an effort to discover the cause of autism and develop effective treatments.”</p> <p>“The UW Autism Center is part of the Institute on Human Development and Disability (IHDD) at the University of Washington and incorporates faculty and staff from the UW School of Medicine, College of Arts & Sciences, and College of Education.”</p> <p>“UW Autism Center has a satellite clinic on the UW Tacoma campus. Through active collaboration with local professionals and parents, the Tacoma site provides clinical services to the South Sound and strives to increase community capacity to serve individuals with ASD through education and training.”</p>
Vanderbilt University, School of Engineering, Frist Center for Autism and Innovation	The center “brings engineers, business scholars, and disabilities researchers together with experts in neuroscience and education to understand, maximize, and promote neurodiverse talent.”

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Governments	
Name	Brief Overview
Australian Government	Australia's Aurora Neuroinclusion Program offers professional development and support for neurodivergent individuals looking to find jobs and grow their careers in Australian Public Service.
US Government	<p>"The Neurodiverse Federal Workforce pilot program . . . aims to change how neurodivergent job candidates are recruited, hired, and retained for federal positions."</p> <p>"The program will support candidates before and after an interview and evaluation process, offer training and support for management and colleagues, and create a playbook with best practices for employers across the Federal Government."</p>
Tech, Banking, and Private-Sector Companies	
Name	Brief Overview
Bank of America	Bank of America promotes continued research on neurodiversity in the workplace and inclusive hiring practices.
Dell	"Neurodiversity@Dell Technologies offers internships and full-time career opportunities for neurodivergent job seekers."
EY	EY is implementing the Neuro-Diverse Center of Excellence program in some US offices "to apply the talents of neurodivergent individuals to meet clients' business needs."
Hewlett Packard Enterprise	Hewlett Packard Enterprise embraces neurodiversity in many roles throughout the company through its Spectrum Success Program.
IBM	IBM champions people with diverse abilities, including neurodiversity, in the workplace.
JPMorgan Chase & Co.	<p>JPMorgan Chase focuses on disability inclusion and neurodiversity through its Office of Disability Inclusion.</p> <p>"Our Office of Disability Inclusion . . . leads strategy and initiatives aimed at advancing careers while helping the firm aspire to be a bank of choice for people with disabilities."</p>
Microsoft	<p>Microsoft connects neurodivergent job seekers with suitable opportunities through the Mentra platform.</p> <p>"Microsoft is expanding its accessible hiring initiatives to embrace neurodiverse individuals, via a program dubbed the Neurodiversity Career Connector. In its pilot phase as of last month, the networking program connects neurodiverse talent with disability-inclusive employers."</p>
SAP	SAP provides hiring and workplace support through its Autism at Work program.

Source: Disability:IN, website, <https://disabilityin.org>; Disability:IN, "About," <https://disabilityin.org/who-we-are/about>; Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability Inclusion, website, <https://www.askearn.org>; Grit & Flow, website, <https://www.gritandflow.com>.

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