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COMMENTARY

Beyond the business case: Universally designing the workplace for neurodiversity and inclusion

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Given that 15–20% of the world's population is neurodiverse (e.g., has ADHD, dyslexia, and/or autism; DCEG Staff, 2022), understanding how to better include these individuals in the workplace is both a social justice and a strategic imperative for organizations. Lefevre-Levy et al.'s (2023) discussion of the latter justification provides ample evidence as to why neurodiversity can benefit individual outcomes and organizational performance. We discuss the limitations of using organizational performance gains as a primary justification for including neurodiverse people in the workplace, which we refer to as the "business case." Recognizing that the business case can be a useful tool of persuasion to bring hesitant decision makers to the table, we review research on the boundary conditions and limitations of the business case. We caution that relying exclusively on the business case can have three important drawbacks: (a) neurodiversity may not always result in performance gains, making the business case a risky wager; (b) neurodiverse people may be dissuaded from joining organizations that view their inclusion primarily as a business imperative; and (c) characterizing neurodiverse people as especially capable or superpowered could detract from inclusion goals by othering and commodifying them. We discuss these issues before presenting what we perceive to be a promising complement to the business case for neurodiversity. Specifically, we draw from principles of universally accessible design (Story, 2001) to suggest that making workplaces accessible and welcoming to neurodiverse people can benefit neurodiverse and non-neurodiverse employees alike.

Limitations of the business case
Business case as a risky wager
The first drawback to the business case for neurodiversity is that it may not be supported. Some research suggests that workplace diversity is positively associated with business and team performance (Gomez & Bernet, 2019), whereas other research finds negative or nonsignificant relationships (Kochan et al., 2003; Pitts & Jarry, 2007). These conflicting findings have been attributed to organizational factors that inhibit the ability to leverage the benefits of multiple diverse perspectives (Ely & Thomas, 2001). One argument underlying the business case is that diversity improves performance by increasing the number of points of view and problem-solving strategies. In practice, these potential gains depend on the inclusion—not just the presence—of people with diverse social identities (Ely & Thomas, 2001). Without inclusion, diversity can create conflict that undermines rather than enhances performance (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007). The benefits of diversity may also take time to realize: despite poorer initial performance, diverse teams' performance becomes similar to homogenous teams' performance over time (Watson et al., 1993). Although observable or surface-level diversity (e.g., race, gender) is not always associated with

enhanced team performance, deep-level diversity (e.g., cognition, attitudes, expertise) often is (Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007). Neurodiversity is considered deep level because it reflects differences in cognition (Lefevre-Levy et al.), but research is needed to understand how neurodiversity, as a highly stigmatized deep-level attribute (Canu et al., 2008; Hull et al., 2017), compares to other forms of deep-level diversity.

Citing financial gain as the primary rationale for including neurodiverse people in the workplace could also unintentionally give rise to a sense of skepticism about the fundamental value of neurodiverse people. Research examining the performance gains associated with hiring neurodiverse people is sparse (see Lefevre-Levy et al.), but existing work on neurodiversity that is focused on the bottom line raises bigger issues related to neurodiverse employees' right to dignified work. For instance, one review of autistic employees' performance found that autistic employees do consistently work part-time hours with an employer on a long-term basis (Jacob et al., 2015). But, the authors conclude that although "there is a potential to greatly reduce societal costs [related to unemployment among autistic people], as of yet it is probably not a strong enough incentive for individual employers to employ adults with ASD" (Jacob et al., 2015, p. 11). This sentiment suggests that predicating neurodiversity on improvements to the bottom line is a risky endeavor that may not yield promising results if workplaces do not make a strategic commitment to reevaluate systems to support neurodiverse employees.

Unintended signaling effects of the business case

A second drawback to the business case for neurodiversity is that this strategy may backfire when it is perceived unfavorably by neurodiverse employees and job applicants. Research on other forms of diversity in organizations suggests that business case justifications for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives are more prevalent than other justifications among *Fortune* 500 companies (Georgeac & Rattan, 2022). However, compared to justifications based on fairness and responsibility, the business case is associated with lower anticipated belongingness and attraction to organizations among those who belong to the social identity groups that are the recipients of these justifications (Georgeac & Rattan, 2022). More promising approaches to diversity acknowledge and value cultural differences and do not ask minoritized employees to assimilate to the dominant culture (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Plaut et al., 2009).

Concerns about the message that a financial justification communicates to the intended beneficiaries of diversity initiatives may be especially pronounced for neurodiverse people. Research finds that individuals with ADHD (particularly those with an inattentive manifestation) tend to exhibit greater sensitivity to injustice compared to non-neurodiverse controls (Schäfer & Kraneburg, 2015). As a result, people with ADHD may be especially likely to perceive fairness-based justifications for neurodiversity more favorably than business case justifications. Further, given that neurodiverse people have been historically underemployed, touting their inclusion primarily as a way for organizations to monetize these individuals could be perceived as insensitive. Justifying neurodiversity based on its benefits for the bottom line alone can have unintended negative consequences for neurodiverse employees and applicants.

Negotiating neurodiverse "superpowers"

The third drawback of the business case is that characterizing neurodiverse individuals as extremely capable could unintentionally marginalize and commodify them. Although some neurodiverse people may find it empowering to think about their differences in cognition as a superpower, others may interpret this characterization as either dividing neurodiverse individuals into those who have extraordinary abilities from those who do not (as mentioned by Lefevre-Levy et al.) or playing into narratives that more generally entrench divides between those who are neurodiverse and those who are not. People with ADHD sometimes conceptualize their ADHD traits

as an asset on the job (Lasky et al., 2016). However, a person's preference to self-identify as "specially capable" for specific work environments differs from others' descriptions of neurodiverse individuals as having superpowers. This reaction from others can occur because some people may attempt to avoid the discomfort associated with interacting with people with disabilities by effusively praising them—a tendency that Davis and Thibedeau Boyd (2017) refer to as "making it weird" (p. 317).

Acknowledging the positive aspects of a neurodiverse identity is by no means problematic in and of itself. In fact, recognizing the positive aspects of divergent thinking in the workplace is a crucial aspect of moving away from a purely deficit-focused medical model of disability (Cheng et al., 2019). We raise this point because we see a fine line between acknowledging positives and offering effusive praise for people with disabilities stemming from discomfort. Further, highlighting the unique performance-enhancing talents of some neurodiverse individuals could also detract from organizational diversity and inclusion goals by conditioning their access to dignified work on their "special" talents, a condition that non-neurodiverse people are not asked to similarly meet. By focusing on special, capital-generating abilities of neurodiverse people, organizations do not have to fundamentally reevaluate their position on neurodiversity from a systemic perspective. Emphasizing neurodiverse people's unique talents could inadvertently place the responsibility on neurodiverse people to prove that their neurodiversity manifests in a way that produces profit without also asking organizations to increase inclusivity and accessibility.

Universal design as a more targeted approach

We suggest that a universal design (UD) approach to neurodiversity can leverage the talent neurodiverse people bring to organizations while also creating an environment in which their success, and that of their non-neurodiverse peers, is supported (Story, 2001). UD is a concept that originates from architecture and material design (Story, 2001). Traditional design involves creating spaces that are made for and by abled people, with additional modifications specifically intended to accommodate people with disabilities. An example of traditional design is a building in which all entrances have stairs, but some entrances also have ramps for people with impaired mobility. A UD approach would make all building entrances ramped: people with or without mobility impairments could use any entrance they choose. Ramped entrances are also useful for people with bikes, walking strollers, or carrying a trolley. A key benefit of UD is that it aids people who need accommodations and offers unexpected benefits for people who do not.

Incorporating UD principles into the workplace can create environments that allow neurodiverse and non-neurodiverse people alike to reach their full potential at work. For instance, establishing dedicated quiet spaces and limiting strong smells (e.g., food, perfume) in office spaces could mitigate attentional and sensory sensitivities sometimes experienced by people with ADHD and autistic people (DCEG Staff, 2022). Communicating information using multiple modalities (e.g., audio, visual, text and/or image based) also ensures that neurodiverse employees can easily understand key information (DCEG Staff, 2022). These simple changes may make the workplace more comfortable for non-neurodiverse people as well, who may not enjoy an office environment replete with distractions, unnecessarily strong odors, or instructions that are difficult to understand.

As another example, explicitly detailing communication expectations could help reduce the ambiguities of workplace social situations that may pose challenges for some neurodiverse people. This can involve, for instance, setting clear guidelines surrounding email and communication etiquette. We have implemented these standards in our research lab (e.g., stating in a lab guide that a response to important emails is expected within 3 business days). Multiple research assistants have said that they appreciate this guidance. Formalizing and articulating workplace norms that non-neurodiverse people may see as "common sense" can be beneficial for not just neurodiverse

employees but also new employees and people from diverse cultural backgrounds. Small changes to the workplace that are rooted in UD principles can level the playing field so that all team members understand the rules of the game.

Workplace policies can also be retooled to ensure that all employees, regardless of neurodiversity status, are able to work at times that are best for their productivity. People with disabilities may work better during different times of the day than others (e.g., individuals with chronic illnesses or health issues), and allowing (to the extent feasible) employees to complete work during self-set hours outside of typical business hours can ensure that work gets done (Schreuer & Dorot, 2017). As with the other examples presented here, schedule flexibility can benefit neurodiverse employees as well as employees with obligations outside of work. Such structural changes to the workplace are potentially helpful for both neurodiverse and non-neurodiverse employees.

Conclusion

Increasing neurodiversity in the workplace is imperative, both from a business and a social justice perspective. We argue that neurodiversity efforts will be most effective when they move beyond a strictly business approach. We highlighted three limitations of the business case for neurodiversity: the risk that performance gains will not emerge as a result of neurodiversity, the message that financial-based justifications send neurodiverse people, and the care with which positive aspects of neurodiversity should be discussed. To cultivate an inclusive environment that addresses these issues, we suggest a UD approach to neurodiversity in the workplace. In addition to the benefits of universally designed workplaces for neurodiverse people, these changes may also have unintended positive side effects for non-neurodiverse colleagues. A UD approach ensures that neurodiverse and non-neurodiverse people can work in an equitable environment in which accommodations are the norm rather than the exception. Recognizing the benefits of neurodiversity from multiple perspectives, including both organizations and employees, is an important step in reaching the full inclusion of neurodiverse people at work.

Conflicts of interest. The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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