The Future of Work is Neurodiverse

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Q: What new approaches are you seeing for making training more accessible or effective for neurodiverse learners?

A: I'm seeing an increasing focus on understanding and supporting neurodiversity and neurodiverse conditions within training programs, especially in universities. However, there is still a general lack of awareness and understanding about concepts like neurodiversity and conditions like autism and ADHD among the broader population.

For example, university disability/ accessibility offices are typically well-versed in providing accommodations to help neurodiverse students succeed. But in my experience, most university faculty still don't have a clear grasp of what neurodiversity means when we provide training to them. This signals a disconnect – while neurodiversity advocacy has grown substantially, misconceptions still prevail.

I see two key needs. First, we need to promote the concept of neurodiversity using a strengths-based framework (focus on what people can do) and advocate for more universally accessible instructional practices. Second, there is still much work to be done in dispelling deficit- and disability-based myths about common neurodiverse conditions like autism and ADHD among the general public and faculty. Overall, while the neurodiversity community has made progress, we need to step outside our bubble and address lingering knowledge gaps through further awareness and change efforts.

Q: What were the top two or three things that the professors that you worked with found really enlightening? What were their aha moments about neurodiversity?

A: They were surprised to see mental health conditions and giftedness included under the neurodiversity umbrella, alongside things like autism and ADHD that started the movement. One aha moment was realizing how many of their own students potentially have a neurological difference. Another was that some simple, standard practices like providing notes before class could greatly benefit these students.

A few pushed back on always providing advance notes, wanting to maintain some element of surprise. But I explained that not only is that a disservice to neurodiverse students, it hinders accessibility for many other disabilities too.

So, their realization was that there are many basic accommodations and inclusive practices professors could be proactively building into their daily teaching, not just providing reactively upon student request. Making small adjustments to be more organized, sharing notes and materials ahead of time, and

using captions – these types of things benefit all while seamlessly supporting those who need it.

The key takeaways were:

There may be more students with neurological differences than we are aware of.

Thoughtful, proactive teaching practices can greatly improve accessibility and inclusion.

Accommodating individual needs is not unfair to other students – it ensures equity in learning outcomes.

Q: You mentioned Howard Gardner, whose theory of multiple intelligences highlights a number of different ways in which a learner can demonstrate mastery. I'm sure you're aware, the specter of learning styles keeps popping up – how do you help people not conflate the two?

A: Learning styles refer to someone's preference or perception of the best way for them to obtain information, like reading vs listening vs hands-on learning. This matters most in self-directed learning contexts where people choose their preferred modality. However, the most important focus when thinking about this is that one's preferred learning style may not actually be the most effective way to master a new concept or skill.

For example, while someone may prefer to read to learn about canoeing, comprehensive hands-on experience will be vital to actually master canoeing safely down rapids. So as teachers and instructional designers, we must consider the end goal of mastery and provide the full range of learning facets needed, not just cater to learning preferences.

With multiple intelligences theory, the concept is that people have different innate strengths across domains like visual-spatial, interpersonal, logical-mathematical, and so on. Society benefits from this diversity of intelligences. However, just because someone has a strength in one intelligence does not mean that's the only or always the best way for them to learn. A physicist may have strong logical skills but still benefits from learning physics concepts through multiple modalities.

Learning preferences influence how people approach self-directed informal learning, while multiple intelligences speak more to innate strengths. As learning facilitators, we should provide multidimensional learning experiences tailored to the mastery goal rather than just accommodating preferences or relying solely on one intelligence.

Q: In university settings, accommodations are normalized and even codified into law. But workplace accommodations fall under the EEOC as 'reasonable' at the employer's discretion. Some advise to never disclose accommodation needs at the risk of not getting hired. How do we help organizational leaders become more comfortable with the varying strengths of neurodiverse people, so workplaces are more welcoming and people can be their authentic selves without masking?

A: This raises two key issues (1) whether and when to disclose accommodation needs, and (2) how to get employers more willing to provide accommodations.

Disclosure is problematic because outdated views that disabilities equate to deficits still exist. Exposure helps challenge biases. More visibly proactive employers, those who are seen to embrace the unique strengths of neurodiverse workers are safer to disclose to.

The obstacle with accommodations is that it requires employers, managers and colleagues to do things differently. Some cling to a 'survival of the fittest' mentality and resist change. Others want to help but don't know how. Leaders must examine biases in their hiring and workplace practices.

For example, interviews often just assess extroverted self-promotion abilities, not actual job skills. And job descriptions lump diverse responsibilities instead of having specialized roles. So problems arise when the neurodiverse way of working differently is perceived as difficult or disadvantageous, rather than valued for the alternative strengths it offers. Disclosure is needed to get accommodations, but risks not getting hired if the employer can't recognize that neurodiversity brings innovation and productivity, not just challenges.

It boils down to two obstacles: outdated deficit-focused views on neurodiversity (failure to recognize the value of neurodiverse thinking), and resistance to changing workplace practices.

Solutions involve increasing exposure to neuro-distinct people and those with disabilities, challenging biases, rethinking hiring practices and job design, and embracing flexibility and neurodiversity's benefits.

Q: How do you envision the transition from a supportive learning environment to the workplace for neurodiverse individuals?

A: Despite progress in education, workplace cultures are still unequipped to fully accept and accommodate neurodiversity. Organizations say 'disclose

your needs' but can't actually meet them. It's like inviting someone to your home without having food they can eat – they won't feel welcomed or that they belong.

The entry point is knowing if the culture truly embraces flexibility. Does it accept deviations from ingrained norms? Saying 'we're a family here' sounds nice but could signal rigid conformity. Leaders must reexamine biases in practices and proactively build inclusive systems, not just react when individuals request changes.

Progress takes ongoing advocacy and education. You can't expect people who are unaware of neurodiversity to instantly accommodate it without having to learn how first. Students should seek professors open to accommodations and then transition to empathetic employers. The ultimate goal is workplaces designed universally, eliminating the need to retrofit for disabilities or neurodiversity.

We must acknowledge reality while still working toward an ideal future where neurodiversity is recognized as a competitive advantage, not a reluctant accommodation. Students should find mentors to help them navigate biases that still exist while advocating to challenge assumptions. It's not fair to expect individuals alone to prove their worth before receiving support. But grassroots exposure of talents paves the way for systemic change.

Overall the obstacles can be overcome, with effort. Currently, most workplaces are uninformed about neurodiversity; there's a lack of genuinely inclusive and flexible systems, and it places the burden on individuals to prove themselves.

Actions that change this situation include proactive education and willingness to change, building accommodations into universally designed principles, and grassroots advocacy to promote awareness.

Q: Artificial intelligence is one of the hottest topics today. People are excited about AI tools that produce content quickly. Are there opportunities being missed, or risks not being considered, regarding how AI could help or hinder neurodiverse learners master skills they need?

A: AI could significantly help those who struggle with executive functioning skills like organization, time management, and pulling out main ideas – common challenges with conditions like ADHD and autism.

While some worry students will use AI to unethically write entire papers, its true value is in assisting the writing process. Also, AI can lack logic and make factual mistakes. But it writes with confidence, so students must critically evaluate its suggestions.

Where AI excels is helping organize ideas and structure writing. If a student is struggling to start a paper or speech, AI

could assist by recommending an outline, prompting writing flows, and even providing sample introductory paragraphs. This facilitates the process without negating the need for students to still do the writing and citations.

So rather than viewing AI as something being unethically misused, professors should communicate appropriate applications to students. If aided by AI tools for organization but still demonstrating their own analysis and writing abilities, students can benefit. AI will not finish high quality work for them. The focus should be on using technology to assist executive functioning challenges, while still building critical thinking skills.

Q: If you could travel back in time and give your younger self career advice, what would that be?

A: In high school, I wanted to solve major societal problems that were in the news, like violence and crime. If I could travel back in time and advise my younger self, I would say – don't be afraid to be bold, be the early voice for change.

When my neurodivergent son was young, I felt alone in advocating for him against rigid systems. That's why I pursued my doctorate and became Dr. Haskins, thinking credentials were required for others to listen. Now I know there's an entire network of parents facing similar challenges with gifted, neurodivergent children.

I wish I had shared my unconventional ideas and novel solutions much sooner. The battle felt like me against the wall, but it turns out many needed my help and were just waiting for someone to speak up first.

So my advice to my younger self would be to lead bravely with your perspective rather than waiting for formal authority. Challenge existing approaches. There are others who will resonate with your outside-the-box thinking and experiences. Although my path was an anomaly, by speaking out I could have empowered and unified change agents so much earlier.

Recommended Resources

Book: Neurotribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity by Steve Silberman.

Book: The Power of Neurodiversity: Unleashing the Advantages of You Differently Wired Brain by Thomas Armstrong.

Book: The Autistic Brain by Temple Grandin.

Online: The Neurodiversity Network wwww. theneurodiversitynetwork.com

Consulting: www.theresahaskins.com