Canaries in the Coalmine: The Need for Ongoing Development in Neurodiversity Hiring Programs

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Executive Summary (Abstract)

Organizations undertaking formal neurodiversity hiring programs, or who promote neurodiversity hiring, should consider the following findings, as well as best practices developed by other companies already undertaking these programs, in order to achieve success:

1. **<u>Collaborate with outside resources.</u>** Neurodiversity programs should actively collaborate with the public, private, and corporate resources already available in their area. No one resource can fill all needs, and companies wishing to actively engage in neurodiversity hiring would be wise to consider a community-based effort comprising vocational rehabilitation organizations (public), other companies invested in this type of programming (corporate), and workforce development/business coaching specialists (private/non-profit) with experience working with neurodiverse clients.

2. **<u>Ensure adequate infrastructure is in place at inception.</u>** The level of needed infrastructure will depend on the size of the organization, but at a minimum should include:
   a. <u>Management training on diversity and inclusion</u> practices including neurodiversity, either formally (mid- to large-sized organizations) or informally (smaller organizations).
   b. <u>Engagement of Human Resource organization</u> to create transparent and equally-applied disclosure and accommodations processes, at hire and after hire.
   c. <u>Training and acculturation ethos for all employees</u> on broad diversity and inclusion principles and practices, including neurodiversity.

3. **<u>Ensure adequate infrastructure is available for the longer term.</u>** To foster retention of all employees, organizations should consider:
   a. <u>Soft skills training opportunities</u> including Leadership, Time Management, Negotiation, Communication, and Interpersonal Skills.
   b. <u>Career development opportunities</u> that take into consideration each employee's strengths, weaknesses, and preferences, remembering the overall retention goal of keeping the employee at the *company*, not in a given *job*.
   c. <u>Support affiliation with outside, cross-organization networks</u> (Birds of a Feather groups) to develop best practices, as well as fostering ERGs (Employee Resource Groups).
   d. <u>Access to outside neurodiversity specialists</u> (for employees), trainers and mediators (for management).

Introduction

Under grant funding through the California EDD (Employment Development Department) and its Disability Employment Accelerator initiative, and as private pay providers, we met with currently-employed, high-functioning autistic employees working in Silicon Valley between June and December 2017. The goal of our work in this program was to provide 1:1 coaching for salaried, professional autistic (neurodiverse) employees to aid in their employment retention. The secondary goal was to identify any common challenges and determine possible amelioration for future neurodiversity programming and other Diversity and Inclusion type programming. This report discusses findings and makes recommendations.

Methods

For this report, we compared case notes between July and December 2017 from eight clients who have been previously diagnosed as autistic. All clients are working full-time in a professional capacity at four different companies: three international 'household name' high tech companies, and one smaller, but well-known company, all here in Silicon Valley. All are college educated, one has a master's degree, and three others have additional post-baccalaureate education.

Participants

Participant	Age	Gender	AaW?[1]	Disclosed?[2]	No. Sessions	Role
Emp1	30s	M	N	N	9	SW engineer
Emp2	20s	M	N	N	5	SW engineer
Emp3	20s	M	N	N	11	SW engineer
Emp4	50s	F	Y	Unk[3]	9	Test engineer
Emp5	30s	M	Y	Y	15	SW engineer
Emp6	50s	M	Y	Unk[3]	8	HW engineer
Emp7	50s	F	Y	Y	15	UX/writer
Emp8	40s	M	Y	Y	10	Network engineer

1. Was the employee part of a formal neurodiversity program at hire?
2. Is the person formally disclosed to management and/or HR?
3. Is the current manager aware that employee is autistic?

→ The average cohort participant profile is a male software engineer who has disclosed his autism, with a median age of about 35.
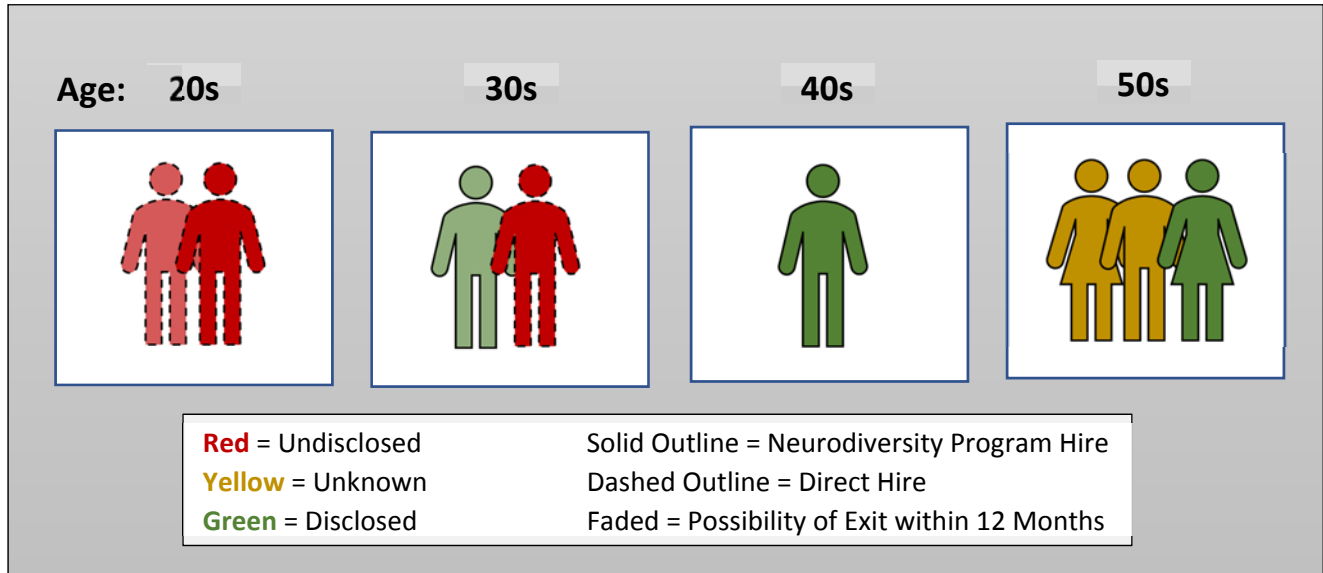
General Cohort Impressions

Before discussing specifics of the cases, an overview of each participant's relative functioning in relationship to his/her job is in order. Retention level refers to how likely the participant is to maintain employment given current performance and job satisfaction.

Participant	Anticipated Retention
Emp1	**High.** Very capable and invested in career; difficulties lie with moderate health concerns, work/life balance, some issues with focus and activation at work.
Emp2	**High.** Very capable and invested in career; difficulties lie in misunderstanding other's comments and others misunderstanding him – often believes he is 'in trouble' even though he is far more junior than the rest of his team and is not expected to work at their same level. Self-esteem and anxiety issues.
Emp3	**Moderate.** Very capable, but has challenges in activation and follow-through. Does not always connect the dots or generalize what he has learned on previous projects to current project.
Emp4	**High.** Very capable and invested in career; difficulties lie with additional mental health issues and a history of being misunderstood by peers. Believes she is in trouble often. Some self-esteem issues.
Emp5	**Low.** Very intelligent, but not demonstrating 'work-capability' or investment in career. Very low self-esteem and self-advocacy abilities. Poor follow-through and ability to manage self in workplace.
Emp6	**High.** Very capable and invested in career; difficulties with 'career creep' where he has moved through reorganization into an area that is new (and somewhat uncomfortable) to him, though handling it well.
Emp7	**High.** Very capable and invested in career; difficulties in career development as she has hit the top of her field in her current role and manager is somewhat ineffective in developing her.
Emp8	**High.** Very capable and invested in career; difficulties primarily in work-life balance, and boundary setting at work. Takes on more than he probably should.

> → **Six of the eight cohort participants are highly successful in their jobs and will likely continue employment at these companies. This is at least on par, if not higher, than national retention statistics per annum.[1]**

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[1] Bureau of Labor and Statistics. JOLTS, Nov 2017. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/jolts.pdf. Retrieved January 20, 2018.

Demographics at a Glance

Age: 20s	30s	40s	50s

Red = Undisclosed   Solid Outline = Neurodiversity Program Hire
Yellow = Unknown   Dashed Outline = Direct Hire
Green = Disclosed   Faded = Possibility of Exit within 12 Months

Due to confidentiality concerns, employees will not be identified in descriptions of challenges documented below.

Endemic Challenges

This section discusses the following challenges common in this cohort which may impact employee retention:

- ☐ Career Development and Training
- ☐ Work/Life Balance
- ☐ Self-Advocacy and Disclosure
- ☐ Social Issues
- ☐ Mental Health Issues

Career Development

General Findings: Six of the eight (75%) employees described needing additional support in the area of career development.

Discussion: One employee is fully engaged in work, but as is true with many very high profile, multi-talented individuals, is continually pulled on to many different projects, often in emergency situations. Because of his ability, he has recently been selected for a fellowship, a rare

honor. And although he is highly valued by the company, he is unclear what his career path will look like.

Another faced a different challenge. He was originally at another of these four companies before being fired and moving to another company in this same group. This employee was put in charge of a small project, yet he had not received any education in school on project management (which is not a requirement in any CompSci programs we surveyed) and had no practical training or experience in managing a project. When he failed to communicate effectively with cross-functional team members and did not get needed (but unspoken) buy-in from these people, he was summarily fired.

Another employee's challenge was another classic problem – that of having run the course of a given career, with the only direct career path being to management. While employees in engineering often have the alternate path of fellowships and more senior positions, those employees who are not in engineering proper may find themselves 'topped out' on the promotion path and must consider lateral moves. She had recently been asked to join a cross-functional team on a part-time basis – a team whose work would benefit her 'home team' down the road, would likely help to resolve some cross-functional issues that the group had run into in the past – and would help her in her career development. However, due to headcount restraints, her manager told her that she would not allow the employee to participate. This employee has been previously told by this manager that the career path of (people) manager is likely not open to her because she is autistic.

Another employee faced the challenge of the 'hamster wheel effect'. He had been working on a loosely-defined project that had no real end date, suffered from ongoing scope creep and was not integrated into the rest of the team's project. This made it difficult for him to focus as there was 'no there there' – his work, and thus his career, had lost focus through lack of milestones and/or integration.

As an older worker, another employee's concerns were about being pigeon-holed in her position, and feeling that actively engaging in career development might jeopardize her current role. This perceived threat is also likely because of gender: women have traditionally not been as active in their career development, as they have been told – directly and indirectly – that it is somehow ungrateful to want more. While one continues to look for other opportunities, she also fears that trying to move forward may endanger her current position.

A final employee is in a slightly different position. As a 'dyed in the wool' engineer of many years, also later in his career, he has been tasked with work that is quite different from his past experience. Instead of cut and dried development, his new role is in product marketing where he has been tasked in identifying potential customer-facing solutions using a newly-acquired product. This was very different work than he had done in the past, and required a great deal of

flexibility in thinking, as well as interdepartmental networking, something he had rarely done before. This career change was unbidden.

<u>General Issues Found:</u>

- ☐ Lack of employee's self-determination in career path
- ☐ Lack of concrete guidelines for career path
- ☐ Significant lack of internal training opportunities to gain needed, non-technical skills

Work/Life Balance

<u>General Findings:</u> Four of the eight employees (50%) described difficulty in managing their personal lives effectively due to work demands.

<u>Discussion:</u> One employee frequently worked overtime and had to cancel various appointments due to emergencies at work, which has had direct impact on his life in several areas, including securing new housing. Two other employees found that working at home one or more days a week kept them more balanced and productive as they could spend time working rather than commuting, and would rethink their employment if they were no longer able to telecommute.

One of these employees was concerned that asking for an additional work at home day would reflect badly on her, even though she acknowledged that there was no rational reason for her employer to be concerned. Incidentally, another male employee at this same company has had no problem structuring his schedule so that he can work at home several days a week, possibly pointing to a gender gap in self-advocacy and self-determination.

An employee struggled with activation in his personal life because he was often so sapped after work that he did not have energy to follow through on what he wanted to do for personal growth and enjoyment. Another stated she would consider working at another office simply because it was closer to home, even if the work wasn't as interesting. Another employee stated that he had signed up for all P1 (priority 1) call for the entire holiday period, based on the fact that he had no family and did not want to burden other team members who had families. However, he has had a few personal issues arise, and then found himself stressed.

Six of the eight employees work on campuses which offer meals and a variety of services, including places to take naps and exercise. As one employee suggested, it almost felt like the companies were actively encouraging employees to give up their personal life: "There's no reason to ever leave."

More than half (62.5%) stated that they had not taken a true vacation in the last two years, and two employees had recently been reminded that they need to use up accrued vacation time. Those who had taken vacations in the last year have close relationships or family, and took

vacations with their loved ones or to visit family out of the area. Those without close relationships tended to take less time off. One person had used accrued time for health issues.

General Issues Found:

- ☐ Perceived culture of needing to put in excessive 'face time' to prove worth
- ☐ Perceived culture that personal life must always be secondary to work
- ☐ Lack of personal acknowledgement/self-advocacy for importance of rest

Self-Advocacy and Disclosure

General Findings: 62.5% of the cohort had some issue with self-advocacy around disclosure and accommodations; (37.5%) had significant issues in this area that had a direct effect on their ability to function well at work.

Discussion: One employee has been reorganized and has no idea if his current manager knows that he is autistic, and does not know who to ask or how to broach the subject. Another has an opposite challenge in that he has been widely promoted as part of his company's neurodiversity program, so that his diagnosis is well known, and he is somewhat concerned about whether there is now or will be in the future, potential backlash. Two others both have concerns that the general knowledge of their diagnosis may have negative impact on their career growth, as it may unnecessarily cut them off from potential career paths ("autistic people can't be managers") that would be open to neurotypical peers.

Two more employees are both undisclosed, but both are aware that their peers and management know that they are 'different' in some ways, which makes them uncomfortable. In both cases there is no clear path, now post-hire, for them to disclose. Both are concerned that they may be forced to disclose if their job is threatened, which has increased their anxiety over retention.

General Issues Found:

- ☐ Unknown and/or unclear company disclosure and accommodation process
- ☐ Unknown process of sharing disclosure information with new and senior management
- ☐ Fear of repercussion or rejection if disclosed

Social Issues

<u>General Findings:</u> Seven of eight employees (87.5%) acknowledged having some social challenges in the workplace and have been told one or more of the following by peers or management:

- ☐ They are 'blunt'
- ☐ They are 'too sensitive'
- ☐ They 'don't understand' and misconstrue meaning
- ☐ They 'don't follow through' because they don't do the next 'logical thing'
- ☐ They make inappropriate comments or 'overdramatize' situations

<u>Discussion</u>: Because the employees represented in this report are all engaged in high-level work, social issues which can be pervasive in neurodiverse populations are relatively low in this cohort. However, that is not to say that there are no issues whatsoever. Areas that are particularly challenging include:

- ☐ **Ambiguity** – One half (50%) of the cohort has struggled with ambiguous work assignments or directives from management.
- ☐ **Hidden agendas or meaning** – One third (37%) of the cohort endorses missing key (yet undefined) elements of a workplace situation or assignment with negative effect. One was fired for misconstruing an assignment.
- ☐ **Lack of clear expectations** – One third (37.5%) of the cohort had been in a situation where they felt they had to 'assume' what the right thing to do was, as attempts to clarify with management met with resistance.

Mental Health Issues

<u>General Findings:</u> Four people in this cohort are being actively treated for anxiety (50%) and three are being actively treated for depression (37.5%).

<u>Discussion:</u> Mental health issues are rampant across all populations in the workforce today. According to the NIH[2] at any given point in time:

- ☐ 18% of adults have an anxiety disorder
- ☐ 9.5% have depression
- ☐ 4% have ADHD

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[2]Mental Health Conditions in the Workplace and ADA. https://adata.org/factsheet/health. Retrieved December 12, 2017.

According to WHO, over US$ 1 trillion dollars are lost annually in the world economy due to anxiety and depression alone.[3]

Autistic people, who statistically make up less than 1% of the potential workforce, have a higher-than-average incidence of these three challenges. This means they may be doubly impacted: first by being neurodiverse and all that brings to the fore, coupled by additional challenges with anxiety, depression, and/or executive functioning challenges (ADHD).

Of the eight people in this cohort, two have been in IOP programs[4] and a third was referred to an IOP in the last year. The two who participated in IOP did so because of significant anxiety and mood challenges, brought on in part due to work-related stress. One has been previously diagnosed as bipolar, the other received a new diagnosis of generalized anxiety.

The third employee who was referred but did not receive treatment has significant, and mostly untreated, anxiety which significantly interferes with his ability to handle any workload. Because his presentation is so severe, he has been given non-product assignments, such as studying new OS's and languages at his own pace. While he has been successful in doing so (he recently took and passed a level 1 exam), his longevity in employment is in question unless he receives significant treatment outside of work.

In this cohort, as in others we have worked with, neurodiverse individuals often have a very difficult time finding therapists and coaches who understand their diagnoses. This is particularly true in EAP services, where the services are often very generic and the clinicians untrained in neurodiverse challenges. Even with excellent insurance benefits, autistic adults frequently struggle to find good providers.

General Issues Found:

- ☐ Impact on productivity due to stress (inability to focus and problem solve; sense of being overwhelmed)
- ☐ Increasing fear of making mistakes and losing job
- ☐ Lack of access to competent coaching and therapy through EAP programs and insured providers
- ☐ Occasional escalation of mental health issues, requiring intensive treatment or forced time off

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[3]Mental Health in the Workplace, Information Sheet. http://www.who.int/mental_health/in_the_workplace/en/. Retrieved December 23, 2017.

[4] Intensive Outpatient Programs are typically partial-day programs in a hospital or psychiatric facility, used to stabilize those patients in distress, and to teach them better coping skills, typically using Cognitive Behavioral Therapy or Dialectical Behavioral Therapy techniques.

Best Practices in Place

As important as it is to raise issues, it is equally important to highlight the best practices already in place in current neurodiversity hiring programs. Below is a list of the efforts that have been proven to work well in these programs:

- ☐ <u>Disclosure</u> – Employees who were disclosed to their managers typically had an easier time navigating their workplaces and succeeding on the job as they were more open to discuss any difficulties in a context that was easier to explain. Of note, however, is that those employees who were disclosed to managers who did not have training in neurodiversity were no more comfortable or productive than if they had not disclosed. (Imagine informing your manager that you were blind, when s/he had no notion of what that meant, or how it impacted your ability to do your job.) Disclosure should be hand-in-hand with management training, and new or 'transferee' managers should also be trained.
- ☐ <u>Mentoring</u> – Those employees who had an identified internal mentor who had also received training, and who followed up regularly with the employee, were more successful in navigating the company infrastructure, asking for accommodations, and feeling welcomed in the company. These relationships are often life-changing to both the mentor and the mentee.
- ☐ <u>Management Support</u> – Autistic employees in companies who make diversity and inclusion a visible part of the overall culture feel more supported and welcomed, particularly when they are actively engaged in participating in and leading diversity programming, and when management takes an active interest in their promotion and well-being.
- ☐ <u>Specialized Onboarding</u> – One of the greatest hallmarks of success is the use of specialized onboarding training for neurodiverse employees. This training, if developed well, goes a long way in helping the new neurodiverse employee learn the corporate culture, ask for accommodations and access services, as well as train the new employee on workplace fundamentals that may be weak in this segment of the workforce due to social and executive functioning challenges (organization, time management, prioritization, skills not particularly lacking in this cohort).
- ☐ <u>Accommodations</u> – Access to reasonable accommodations is imperative for any inclusion program, yet some companies still struggle in understanding their importance, and the importance of corporate-wide egalitarianism for all mental and physical challenges. There should be no difference in request and approval for reasonable accommodations for a vision-impaired employee versus an autistic employee, yet this parity is rare.
- ☐ <u>Normalization</u> – As indicated previously, one of the best practices in all inclusion programs is to normalize what society has come to cast as 'abnormal', whether it is a physical, medical, or hidden disability (neurodiversity). Companies that seek to start any

neurodiversity program should first ask if they are truly willing to treat neurodiverse employees as equals, capable of promotion, leadership, and innovation, just like their neurotypical peers. Failure to tightly weave diversity and inclusion within the fiber of the company will disenfranchise employees and the autistic communities alike, and cause these programs to fail.

☐ **Access to Resources** – Programs that have engaged business, therapeutic, and community partners to help them steer through any rough patches are more likely to be successful. Accessing multiple perspectives from inside and outside the corporation helps prevent an echo chamber effect, to ensure that these programs are more than public relations efforts. Further, we would encourage businesses to create ongoing, multidisciplinary steering committees, drawing on vocational rehabilitation professionals, mental health professionals, corporate peers, and neurodiverse leaders to foster collaboration and growth,

Proposed Recommendations

As noted above, many of the issues that presented while working with this neurodiverse cohort fell into certain repeating themes that have also been expressed by non-impacted, neurotypical high-tech workers here in Silicon Valley. While two of the four companies represented are in the top 15 of Glassdoor's best places to work in 2017, none of these companies are wholly without their systemic challenges with regards to either diversity and inclusion or employee development and retention across the board.

Put another way, the neurodiverse employees in this cohort may indeed be *canaries in the coalmine*: while they may experience some of the deleterious effects of current work conditions in Silicon Valley more acutely, these challenges ripple through the entire workforce.[5]

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[5] The focus on profitability rather than workforce retention is common in an 'employer driven' job market. If the economy continues to grow, and the millennial workforce continues to shift focus from profit to personal values, companies will likely need to return to basic principles in place prior to and during the dot-com bust to retain employees.

We will discuss potential solutions broken down to roughly map to the employment lifecycle:

- ☐ Onboarding
- ☐ Feedback and Review Cycles
- ☐ Career Development
- ☐ Reorganizations
- ☐ Termination and Exiting

Onboarding

<u>General Recommendations:</u> This is a key event between employee and employer, but often is considered 'wasted time' taken up by filling out seemingly-endless forms. Companies would be wise to use this time to:

- ☐ Provide diversity and inclusion training to all employees, including training segments on neurodiversity in the workplace.
- ☐ Provide information on how to disclose physical or mental health challenges now or in the future; how accommodations are handled (who is notified now and in the future); what ongoing support is available through EAP, life coaching, and employee groups.

<u>Discussion:</u> Onboarding is an ideal time to convey the culture of this workplace by providing simple and direct diversity and inclusion training to all employees. In this way, companies and their management can make it clear that *all* employees are to be treated with respect – including those neurodiverse employees with autism, mood or learning challenges.

This one change – having neurodiversity promoted as part of diversity and inclusion training at the time of onboarding <u>all</u> employees – would make a phenomenal difference to the entire workforce in that it would bring neurodiversity into general conversation to help normalize it for all employees.

Onboarding is also the ideal time to convey information to all employees about disclosure and services available – companies should remember that statistically 1:4 of their employees *at any given time* has a diagnosable mental health challenge that very well could be impacting their ability to work. By making disclosure safe (and easy), companies can:

- ☐ Increase employee productivity
- ☐ Provide simple and cost-effective solutions to increase retention
- ☐ Increase employee satisfaction by 'humanizing' the workplace across the board

We believe that creating an actual roadmap for employees to use in order to disclose and receive accommodations and support would make a significant difference to the workforce

by increasing retention and employee satisfaction. Benefits of a transparent set of policies include:

- ☐ Educating employees and managers about reasonable accommodations
- ☐ Educating co-workers and peers about specific challenges if requested by the disclosing employee
- ☐ Creating an environment of inclusion instead of shame and difference
- ☐ Ensuring that all companies with federal contracts meet their Section 503 guidelines through open disclosure

Organizations should refer to the Job Accommodations Network's publications from the federal Office of Disability Employment Policy that posts guidelines for use by employers and employees (https://askjan.org/Erguide/index.htm). Furthermore, transparency also helps avoid:

- ☐ Last-minute disclosures when an employee is threatened with termination
- ☐ Conflict over what reasonable accommodations entail
- ☐ Managers making 'spot decisions' for one employee, thus creating inconsistency in application across the company which can lead to legal issues

While the law clearly states that no one can be asked to disclose, this does not mean that companies should make it difficult to do so. In fact, evidence suggests that an open disclosure policy will have positive effects on employee retention.

Onboarding is also the time to lay out all of the mental health benefits available to employees, ranging from health insurance options, EAP options, and in-house wellness and coaching options.

<u>Recommendations for Neurodiversity Programs:</u>

- ☐ All employees coming in through a neurodiversity hiring initiative or program should be assured that s/he will receive the same compensation, same opportunities, and same treatment as neurotypical peers. The focus must be on 'different but equal' not 'special'.
- ☐ All managers of neurodiverse employees must be trained on these same principles, must be trained on diversity and inclusion practices, and should receive training on basic management practice.
- ☐ Companies in general, and certainly those undertaking neurodiversity hiring programs, would be wise to rethink their mental health and wellness continuum to ensure there are no practical gaps in coverage. This could be done by surveying and compiling a list of services available for all employees, ranging from private pay clinicians by specialty, insurance-based, EAP, community-based mental health coverage, as well as in-house coaching and services. Again, many neurodiverse workers struggle in finding good services, and to ensure retention, companies should step in to facilitate that search.

- ☐ Ideally, employees should receive customized onboarding that discusses the nuances of the company's unique culture in such a fashion as to make the information easily accessible.
- ☐ Ideally, employees should be assigned a mentor who both knows the business and understands neurodiversity in adults.
- ☐ Ideally, all managers and all neurodiverse employees should have access to a neurodiversity specialist outside of the organization to provide coaching, mediation, and ongoing feedback to the program.

Feedback and Review Cycles

<u>General Recommendations:</u> As in other functional areas, Silicon Valley companies appear to be going backwards in developing and supporting managers. All managers should:

- ☐ Receive training and mentoring in management principles
- ☐ Understand the company's protocol for performance management, particularly poor performance
- ☐ Hold regular 1:1s with direct reports to discuss both tangible and 'soft' performance
- ☐ Provide specific and measurable directives to junior and struggling employees

<u>Discussion:</u> All employees need regular feedback. While formal review cycles, stack ranking, and compensation discussions are by nature long and tedious, giving feedback doesn't have to be hard. It just needs to be consistent and timely.

Too often, employees only receive positive feedback in the form of compensation or promotion, and negative feedback in the form of a performance improvement plan. All employees need regular (at least once a month) meetings with their manager to discuss *performance* – not operations, or challenges, or business-related topics, but the employee's performance in handling these tasks.

This does not have to be formal or lengthy. It can be as simple as "You did an amazing job on getting that project back on track. I truly appreciate it." Or, "Next time folks in QA make you crazy, you need to take a deep breath before you respond in email. I know you were frustrated, but I can't have you blowing up like that. If in doubt, send the email to me first." Specific and meaningful feedback is necessary for all employees to get a read on how they are doing, and what they need to continue to work on.

This brings us to another unfortunate trend: no real manager. Of the eight people in this cohort, three of them do not have a direct manager who oversees their work product. Two other people in this cohort believe that their managers are 'too busy' to speak with, and

thus do not have any meetings with them at all. In short, five of the eight people – 62.5% – do not have a direct manager who is giving them feedback, good or bad, on a regular basis.

Regular 1:1 meetings with all employees foster:

- ☐ Ongoing course correction, particularly with junior employees or employees who are struggling
- ☐ Early identification of missing skills; chance to mentor and instruct
- ☐ Higher employee satisfaction

As a very wise vice president once told us: *No one should ever be surprised by his or her review. If they are, you have done a poor job managing them*.

<u>Recommendations for Neurodiversity Programs:</u>

- ☐ Neurodiverse employees, particularly junior staff, must be given concrete directives with specific timelines. All objectives should be SMART (specific, measurable, actionable, realistic, and timebound).
- ☐ Employees should have bi-weekly 1:1s (minimally) with management for the first two to three months to go over work performance as well as any personnel issues.
- ☐ Management must have access to outside neurodiversity specialists who can coach them on managing neurodiverse individuals.
- ☐ Employees must have access to outside neurodiversity specialists who can coach them on their work performance.
- ☐ Ideally, employees should have access to employee groups supporting neurodiversity.
- ☐ Employees should be given ample time to prepare their own feedback for annual reviews, and ideally be given specific samples of the type of information they should be submitting to their managers.

Career Development

<u>General Recommendations:</u> Employees should:

- ☐ Have annual discussions with manager on career growth opportunities in and outside of the department
- ☐ Have opportunities, as feasible, to work on matrixed or cross-functional projects
- ☐ Have access to technical and 'soft' training opportunities
- ☐ Have access to company policy on grades, salaries, and requirements for promotion

<u>Discussion:</u> In the last fifteen years, the concept of active career development as being part of the relationship between employer and employee appears to have largely fallen to the wayside.

However, an important aspect of employee retention is career development, and components of that should include:

- ☐ Clear understanding of the various career paths open to all salaried employees
- ☐ Clear understanding of how an employee moves along a given path
- ☐ Access to training and work assignments that foster growth within the company (not just the department)
- ☐ Annual performance reviews, including goals for career development and discussion of progress

Another issue that came up in two cases was the concern of being 'stuck' in a given organization with no ability to grow laterally. While departmental work should take precedence, more senior employees should be allowed to network and collaborate with other parts of the organization to foster retention. This should be an executive mandate.

Cross-functional projects:

- ☐ Allow organizational 'best practices' to be developed and flourish
- ☐ Allow useful connections between business units
- ☐ Allow employees to see the bigger picture, and potentially find new opportunities within the organization

Managers should come to understand that retention does not necessarily mean retention in his/her group, but retention in the organization as a whole. Failure to allow more senior employees access to these types of opportunities run a risk of having the employee leave the company altogether.

Recommendations for Neurodiversity Programs:

- ☐ Employees should have access to information on career paths available to all employees.
- ☐ Employees should not be restricted from management or other positions based solely on their diagnosis. Instead, the criteria for career development should be clearly spelled out and their performance measured against it.
- ☐ Employees should be encouraged to continue to work on both technical and soft skills. Outside coaching from neurodiversity specialists on soft skills should be made available.
- ☐ Employees should be allowed to participate in cross-functional teams as feasible.

Reorganizations

General Recommendations: Reorgs are stressful for all employees and the truth is that management frequently makes the stress worse by believing that no news is good news. However, people will find out something is afoot, and without leadership stepping forward will always assume the worst, which destroys morale and productivity. Therefore, best practices include:

- ☐ Alerting employees that a reorganization is coming, even if no details are known
- ☐ Continuing to provide information as it becomes available
- ☐ Assuring that incoming management will meet with all new directs soon after the reorganization is in place to discuss new job roles, if necessary

Discussion: Reorgs are a fact of life in tech. However, how the transition occurs can be done well or can be done poorly. All managers should be instructed on some of the basic principles of change management, and understand that communication should not be one-directional, but bi-directional, and actively engage all of their employees in discussion.

Three of the employees in this cohort have been part of reorganizations in the last two years, and only one of them had a face-to-face meeting with the new manager as part of the reorg. One was simply assigned a new technical lead and told to report to him, and the final employee has only met with his new manager about once every other month. In two of the three cases, it is unclear if the incoming manager knows the employee's diagnosis or not, and now many months later, it would be completely out of context to bring it up.

Incoming managers should be debriefed on each employee transferring to his/her group, and should have initial 1:1 meetings soon after the reorg to openly discuss personal challenges, workstyle, preferences, and expectations.

Recommendations for Neurodiversity Programs:

- ☐ Whenever possible, employees should have a face-to-face with the outgoing manager to be given advanced notice that a reorganization will occur, and be given the opportunity to decide whether the incoming manager should be told of the employee's diagnosis.
- ☐ Whenever possible, the incoming manager should have a face-to-face meeting with the employee to discuss the transition before or soon after the reorganization.

Termination and Exiting

General Recommendations:

Terminations should, in part, be considered a failure of management, either in hiring, developing, or supporting its workforce. Employees who voluntarily leave a company for reasons other than better alignment to personal and/or career goals is always a failure of management.

- ☐ Terminations should be based on failure to meet explicit, time-based goals, which are clearly understood by the employee.
- ☐ Requests for transfer by employees whose performance is not an issue should be honored whenever possible, or companies will lose their investment in talented employees.
- ☐ All exiting employees should be interviewed and their comments captured and considered to identify and rectify systemic issues.

Discussion: While only one of the members of his cohort has left the job or been terminated, three members spoke openly about peers leaving their companies. One employee noted that while his company's long-standing protocol was that employees were free to move to other departments to develop their careers, he has seen two peers disallowed transfers because of headcount constraints, who then left the company entirely.

Further, it appears that at least in two of the four companies, exit interviews were not held for employees leaving voluntarily, and the one person who was terminated was told to quit or be fired two months into a performance improvement plan of indeterminate length. He as not given an exit interview.

Managers should receive training on how Performance Improvement Plans (PIPs) and terminations should be conducted, and all employees leaving the company should be interviewed and their comments and concerns captured by Human Resource managers. While it may always be uncomfortable, there are 'good' ways to fire an employee so as to both protect the company and to leave the employee with the understanding that this was simply not a good fit – not that the employee is a failure. And again, all reasons for leaving the company should be heard, or the company risks a potential 'brain drain' by not ferreting out systemic issues within the organization.

Recommendations for Neurodiversity Programs:

- ☐ Caution, as in all hiring, should be used when hiring employees to ensure that the job is a good fit both for the employee and employer. Employees who cannot successfully do the job within three months of hire should be let go or a 'job carve' should be immediately implemented and made transparent to the department. Keeping employees on staff whose performance is well-below average damages morale and undermines the efforts of all diversity and inclusion practices.

- ☐ Performance Improvement Plans must be written following SMART guidelines, and must be time-bound. Employees must be given concrete ways that they can improve their performance, must be given adequate time to improve, and must understand that the consequence of failing to improve will be termination.
- ☐ Terminations must be handled by adequately-trained staff and should focus on poor fit and inability to work in *this* company, and not unnecessarily criticize the employee.
- ☐ Terminated employees should receive outplacement services that understands, and can accommodate for, neurodiverse needs.
- ☐ All exiting employees must have formal exit interviews, and their comments should be made available to senior management and human resources for review.

Conclusions

As stated at the beginning of this report, many of the challenges facing neurodiverse employees today are the same issues their neurotypical peers face:

- ☐ Lack of adequate management and management training
- ☐ Lack of career development opportunities
- ☐ Lack of training opportunities, particularly in soft skills training such as negotiation, communication, leadership, and time management
- ☐ Lack of consistent, inclusive corporate position on diversity and inclusion
- ☐ Mixed messages of employees' responsibility of managing personal wellness while handling ever-increasing job demands

However, neurodiverse employees face the additional burden of:

- ☐ Unclear/inconsistent processes of disclosure and accommodation requests
- ☐ Lack of transparency in what happens after disclosure
- ☐ Lack of support for mental health needs
- ☐ Lack of identified community resources to support their retention needs

What is most concerning to this author is that while there are specific issues that the neurodiverse population face, much of their challenge is endemic across current high tech culture. As an older person, I find it worrisome that so much of what was learned decades ago about employee satisfaction and retention has been forgotten or cast aside.

The pendulum swings from *employer-centric* to *employee-centric* in Silicon Valley as the economy ebbs and flows. As the economy regains steam post 'Great Recession of 2008', the workforce balance is tipping again towards employees, where stock options, swag, and free lunches will not be enough to retain valued employees.

As always, employees want increasing autonomy, self-determination in their careers, meaningful acknowledgement and respect for their personal lives – and autistic employees are no different. From the work we have done over the last eleven years, we know that these are often lacking in today's companies, and the infrastructures to recoup them post-recession are gone.

Further, for diversity and inclusion practices to be truly effective, companies need to 'walk the walk' after 'talking the talk'. Several companies in the Bay Area have begun to promote neurodiversity hiring programs, yet only two of any notable substance exist at this writing, frustrating workforce professionals, families, and the neurodiverse population eager to be hired. This lack of engagement invites potential backlash.

Our earnest advice for Silicon Valley companies is to turn to management and retention lessons from the past, while making diversity and inclusion practices truly central to their cultures in tangible and transparent ways. The two are not mutually exclusive: in fact, making diversity and inclusion practices work demands better management practices across the board. This in turn will allow tech to continue to thrive in Silicon Valley, our Valley of Heart's Delight.

About the Author

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