



RISE OF THE CHIEF NEURODIVERSITY OFFICER





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Specialises in advising organisations and boards on the challenges and opportunities of digital transformation, innovation and delivering technology enabled change.

He is also a non-exec director of the British Dyslexia Association, was formerly an Associate Partner with EY's Digital, Data & Analytics capability, part of the leadership team of Deloitte's Customer Transformation practice, and has held board level roles in industry.

The Levell Partnership was established by John Levell to help organisations navigate business transformation – working in the space where people, data, technology and innovation meet.

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As leaders, we need to think differently about “different thinking” because neurodiversity can transform the fortunes of organisations

As you probably know, Directors and Partners in big-4 consultancies don't have dyslexia.

I must have caught mine from my children, I'm sure that must be the case. I certainly can't have had it during education – none of my teachers mentioned it, although it would explain the rather bumpy ride I had at times.

But suddenly, aged 42 and with a successful career already behind me, I found myself sitting opposite an educational psychologist, who was explaining to me that I think differently from most people... something I knew, but had not fully understood. A few years later, Stephen Spielberg had a similar experience describing it as, “The last puzzle piece to a great mystery that I've kept to myself.”¹

I approached my new status as if a reformed smoker – threw myself in to understanding what this meant for me, became the exec sponsor of the EY dyslexia network, a non-exec of the British Dyslexia Association, have written, spoken, been interviewed, counselled, coached and learned from many dyslexics.

Like many, I started with a “disability” view of dyslexia - but something quite different is very clear to me now - as leaders, we need to think differently about “different thinking” because neurodiversity can transform the fortunes of organisations.

What is neurodiversity?

Around 15% of people in the UK have some form of neurodiverse condition. A non-exhaustive list might include dyslexia, autism (including Asperger's Syndrome)², dyspraxia (also known as DCD), ADHD and others. The most common of these is dyslexia, which affects around 10% of people in the UK³. For clarity, I am referring here to people at all levels of IQ - dyslexia, for example accounts for c13k graduates each year⁴ so I don't doubt you have hired some of these people recently. Equally, these people also become our customers, suppliers and competitors – something we rarely consider.

We are increasingly familiar with these terms in the context of educational difficulties and the Equality Act⁵ has brought these protected characteristics to the attention of our HR teams, in a disability context. The negative stereotype is set.

However, there is now substantial evidence that many neurodiverse individuals possess unusually high levels of skill and unique capability in a number of areas and that is the focus of this article.

Is it a *bug* or is it a *feature*?

It turns out that if they exploit their strengths, some neurodiverse individuals can be very successful - Elon Musk, Charles Schwab, Jo Malone, Bill Gates, Anita Roddick, Steve Jobs, Richard Rogers, James Dyson, Bill Hewlett, John Chambers and Stephen Spielberg, to name but a few.

More analytically, Professor Julie Logan of CASS Business School⁶ completed research in 2011 that indicated that entrepreneurs in the UK are twice as likely to be dyslexic as the average, or three times more likely in the US.

So almost certainly a *feature*, if all these successful people are affected? So as leaders, wouldn't it be good if we built our organisations to fully exploit this latent pool of talent?

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employers so we are going to act sympathetically towards the fish – look for *adjustments* we could make to their role, perhaps a new ladder etc. So whether intended or not, we have adopted the *medical model* of disability – it's a *bug* – a problem with the individual.

Not surprising then that the disclosure figures recorded by your HR department probably sit at around the 1-2% level vs the societal norm of 10-15%. Does that mean the recruitment process filters us out at the door; that we feel unsafe disclosing; that the working environment is simply so inclusive that labels don't matter? Experience says it is not usually the latter.

Perhaps the future looks a little brighter...

Thinking about neurodiversity as a *bug*:

- Diversity discussions are beginning to include disability (and hence neurodiversity).
- Some organisations are beginning to adapt recruitment processes, updating policies and changing processes to make them more accessible
- HR departments are increasingly providing access to "reasonable adjustments", supported by the Access to Work⁷ scheme to mitigate the downsides of disability.

There is an even better outlook... looking through the *feature* lens:

Programmes are beginning to emerge in a handful of leading companies that actively target some neurodiverse groups based on the "feature" mindset.

According to the Harvard Business Review⁸ SAP, Hewlett Packard Enterprise (HPE), Microsoft, Willis Towers Watson, Ford, and EY are all running active programmes in the US and others such as Caterpillar, Dell

The fact that programmes even exist is a very positive indication of direction of travel but progress is slow, fragmented and the neurodiversity gap is unlikely to close any time before the end of this century, if at all.

Aren't we already doing this?

Unfortunately, whilst things are improving, most of our activity as employers accidentally treats neurodiversity as a *bug*. We design our organisations for neuro-typical people, measure everyone against standard performance measures and wonder why fish turn out to be less good at climbing trees – a failure on their part perhaps?

Fortunately, most of us are trying to be good

Technologies, Deloitte, IBM, JPMorgan Chase, and UBS are tentatively beginning similar initiatives.

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What is the business case?

As always, the case for change will vary from organisation to organisation but arguably it spans:

Economic argument

10-15% of your customers The value of this market is substantial. What is your current market share with this group? What are their unique needs, buying habits etc?

War for talent 67% HR leaders⁹ believe the war for talent will remain a major issue. A compelling proposition for the neurodiverse could help address this. It could also boost brand awareness and value.

Strategic argument

Practical impact of different thinking

Some neurodiverse people simply see things differently - that difference can bring the leap of thinking that is needed to drive innovation, the spark of creativity or vision needed to transform a product a service or a whole market. What we offer varies, depending on the individual. Sometimes they offer strengths in things like pattern recognition, concentrated attention to detail, high levels of empathy or a range of other characteristics. Employing these capabilities in the right way can transform the fortunes of an organisation.

Diversity & Inclusion Agenda

18% of working age adults have a disability. By pension age, that number will have risen to 44%¹⁰. In working age, neurodiversity is one of the biggest groups – it spans gender, ethnicity, age, and sexual orientation so sits well at the centre of any diversity and inclusivity agenda. What is good for the neurodiverse will also tend to have positive knock-on effects for wider employee groups.

What are some of the basics that we can do straight away?



Ignore your disability statistics

“Better not tell anyone”, was my first thought, once I had a “label”. Most people are reluctant to disclose invisible disability. Low levels of disclosure are likely to tell you more about your culture than the instance of disability – assume 5-10% of your staff are affected and act accordingly.



Obtain Senior Sponsorship

Senior sponsorship is vital. People who are actually involved and will spend the time needed to understand and champion the issue, Even better, find someone who is affected by the issue in some way. Of course, the perfect scenario would be someone brave enough to stand up and admit this



Adjustments that are easy to access

For many, their difficulties can be largely mitigated by the use of a few pieces of inexpensive technology or other simple adjustments. Make this easy to access, a confidential process that does not require individuals to draw attention to their difficulties or seek budget from managers.



Support the creation of a staff network

Where there is a lack of disclosure people are often reluctant to engage with corporate initiatives. A staff network can help you engage with a collective as well as allowing them the autonomy to help themselves. They will need budget and time though.

More than the basics

Do we start with strategy or action? Probably both. There is of course no “one size fits all” answer and for most organisations neurodiversity is outside of their comfort zone—so they may need some level of specialist advice when defining and executing thier



Neurodiversity Strategy

Do you simply want to be an inclusive employer or could Neurodiversity offer competitive advantage? Engage with experts and neurodiverse people – find out more and decide what role neurodiversity will play in your strategic talent agenda.



Don't forget the Board

How neurodiverse is your board? Consider exploring the way your board thinks, makes decisions and whether it needs to add non-executive talent to gently challenge its approach.

Chief Neurodiversity Officer

If I am right, then harnessing neurodiversity could provide organisations with a rich dividend. Smaller disruptive organisations are often self-selecting neurodiverse talent from the outset – their challenge will be to avoid growing in to *cookie cutter* shaped large corporates.

“Harnessing neurodiversity could provide organisations with a rich dividend”

For larger organisations, the key challenges will be: how to access and utilise this latent without breaking their already scaled business models; and how to achieve the level of cultural change needed to make this possible.

Unsurprisingly, the biggest dividends will be the hardest to achieve and much of the change will need to be driven by or sponsored from the top of the organisation. It's not going to be easy, but that shouldn't stop us trying.

Perhaps the rise of the Chief Neurodiversity Officer may be upon us!

Some neurodiverse people simply see things differently - that difference brings the leap of thinking that is needed to drive innovation, the spark of creativity or vision needed to transform a product or a service



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