

Mentoring Tips – Supporting Neurodivergent Colleagues

When you take up the role of a mentor, it is quite possible that you could be working with an individual who is neurodivergent. This basically means the individual's brain functions, learns and processes information differently from the way society expects it to. However, there is no right way of thinking, learning or processing information.

Neurodiversity describes the idea that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways. This may result in differences in social preferences, ways of learning, ways of communicating and/or ways of perceiving the environment. These differences can sometimes be wrongly perceived as a deficit or weakness that requires correction. This is because it is more pronounced in the neurodivergent than in the average or neurotypical individual who behaves in the way society is used to.

It is estimated that over 10% of the population have some degree of neurodiversity, so could form a significant proportion of your work colleagues and customers. Everyone has both talents and things that they struggle with. However, for neurodivergents, the difference between those strengths and challenges can be more pronounced which can bring some advantage but can also be disabling.

With some individuals it will be very obvious that they are neurodivergent, but in many cases it may not be immediately clear to you, or indeed to the individual themselves. In this article we will highlight a few of the indicators that you may need to look out for and provide some guidance on approaches you may need to take in your mentoring.

ADHD, Autism, Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia, and Tourette's Syndrome

are all examples of neurodiversities. These names are just diagnostic labels used to explain the diverse ways of thinking, learning, processing and behaving. In common with all of us, those who are neurodivergent have many talents and face challenges. It is how we work with them to develop these talents and overcome challenges that may be slightly different to how we would usually mentor an individual.

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Autism

Autistic people tend to be very logical, analytical thinkers, making them good problem solvers. Some have a strong ability to focus and concentrate for long periods of time. Autistic people often have an exceptional ability to assimilate and retain detailed information which can result in highly specific interest and technical ability in a specific work area. Along with other skills and talents, autistic people frequently prove themselves punctual, reliable and dedicated.

Potential challenges

Autistic people may find elements of social interaction challenging, finding it hard to ‘read’ other people, and thinking literally: this can be challenging when colleagues use jargon, or metaphors. Because of potential challenges with eye contact, tone of voice, shyness and social anxiety, some autistic people may appear to be aloof or unfriendly. Often, however, autistic people do want to socialise and be included – they may just be anxious and unsure of how to proceed in this area. This could form a key focus for a mentoring relationship.

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is defined by the British Dyslexic Association (BDA) as a lifelong specific learning difficulty that mainly affects the development of literacy and language-related skills, characterised by difficulties with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory and processing speed.

Dyslexic people are famed for general inventiveness and creativity – famous artists from Da Vinci to Picasso and Warhol, who are all thought to have been dyslexic.

The dyslexic brain lends itself to a big picture view. Dyslexic people are also known for their powerful qualitative reasoning or ‘insight’.

Dyslexic people may be comfortable with risk-taking, and may also have developed resourcefulness and problem-solving skills from having to navigate a world shaped largely for neurotypicals.

Potential challenges

While dyslexic people often have highly desirable strengths, they often also face challenges with a weaker working memory, which can manifest as issues with personal organisation.

While it’s a false stereotype to suggest dyslexic people cannot read effectively, they may experience challenges when needing to read or write quickly.

As dyslexia is often particularly subtle and ‘hidden’, dyslexic people may be particularly at risk of being seen as ineffective or even lazy.

Given the lack of awareness and empathy towards dyslexia that they may have experienced and may continue to experience, frustration and mental health issues such as stress and anxiety are also common so a key part of their mentoring may involve helping them to develop coping strategies.

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Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia UK define dyspraxia (or Developmental Co-ordination Disorder) as ‘a complex neurological condition, which affects muscle co-ordination and perception

It was once known as ‘clumsy child syndrome’. At least 1 in 17 people are thought to be dyspraxic.

‘Dyspraxic people tend to be good at bold “big picture” thinking, pattern-spotting and inferential reasoning.’ They are often resourceful and determined problem-solvers.

Potential challenges

Like dyslexic people, dyspraxic individuals may find time management and personal organisation challenging.

ADHD

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is classified as a brain-based disorder characterised by a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity.

Contrary to popular perception, the brains of ADHDers are actually under-stimulated.

Worldwide prevalence of ADHD is estimated at around 3.4% in adults. And is around 3 times more common in men than women.

ADHDers tend to be comfortable taking calculated risks, being at ease with uncertainty and pushing boundaries. ADHDers have an ability to multitask and respond to changing environments and work demands.

Potential challenges

ADHDers can find themselves feeling restless, distracted and easily bored in a role or with tasks that are not sufficiently stimulating, however when they do find a stimulating task they have the ability to hyperfocus.

They may also experience further challenges relating to attention, such as maintaining focus during long meetings, or switching focus once in a state of ‘flow’ on a task.

Mentoring in a neurodiverse relationship not only benefits the mentee, it also enables the mentor to become more aware of the strengths a neurodiverse person can bring to the workplace and the challenges that they face.

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Neurodiversity is variable and can be complex, but is often invisible. Neurodivergent individuals think differently, but in doing so they can make a valuable contribution to improving innovation and creativity within the workplace. They often possess outstanding, unique abilities in specific areas, but can find other aspects of the workplace and their role more difficult.

Many well known successful people are neurodivergent including Richard Branson, Steven Spielberg, Daniel Radcliffe, Jamie Oliver and Michael Jordan all of whom have successfully channelled their traits to help bring about their success.

Often in mentoring we focus on developing strengths and overcoming weaknesses. When working with a neurodivergent individual, it is important to remember that their trait is not a weakness but a different way of doing things. Hence your focus should shift from overcoming weaknesses to supporting the individual to use their skills, talents and abilities to reach their full potential and realise their goals.

Sometimes, there can be a perception that neurodivergent individuals need more support. The reality in fact is that they may just need a different kind of support and therefore you may need to think about adjusting your usual approach.

There are many mis-conceptions around different neurodiverse groups, such as assuming that those with ADHD are unable to concentrate. Whilst ADHD'ers can find themselves distracted and easily bored, one of their key strengths is bringing intense energy and enthusiasm to activities, including multitasking and completing urgent tasks.

When ADHD'ers are engaged and stimulated they can focus very well and generate outstanding output.

When it comes to mentoring it is all about putting aside preconceptions and finding what stimulates your mentee and encouraging them to focus in these areas and nurture their talents.

So when it comes to working with a neurodivergent individual it is important to try to understand the challenges that they face, and to help them cope with these challenges whilst focussing on their strengths and talents to help them excel.

Simple Tips – Supporting Neurodivergent Colleagues

Mentoring Sessions

These are best kept as one-to-one support sessions for short time periods, with sessions regularly spaced.

Create a comfortable and welcoming environment

Ensure you work towards understanding your mentee's strengths and the challenges they face, along with what their preferences are for communication and social interaction. It is important to create an environment where an individual feels comfortable and can open up. This applies to all mentoring relationships but is particularly important when working with neurodivergent individuals.

Communicate clearly

If you think about how you usually communicate, you will do so from your own perspective; imparting information in a way that you would like to receive information or how you presume someone would want that information.

When working with someone who is neurodivergent, you need to become more acutely aware of different communication methods (verbal, written, pictures and images, face-to-face, structured, etc) and make sure you understand the mentee's preferences in communication styles, otherwise it can lead to confusion, stress, and anxiety.

Neurodivergent people may appreciate instructions in multiple formats, so you may want to consider using tools such as mnemonics and mind maps. Always ask the individual what works best for them.

Clarify workplace conventions: Neurodivergent people won't necessarily immediately pick up on the 'unwritten rules' and conventions of an organisation. Autistic individuals, for example, can find the lack of clear, direct information in workplace situations particularly challenging. A mentor can help by talking the individual through some of these conventions such as breaks, dress code, social events etc.

As a mentor you may need to reassure an anxious mentee that if they make a mistake it is not something to dwell on, but can in fact be used as a positive learning experience.

Provide structured, positive feedback

Planning in regular feedback sessions, which are clear and targeted, gives you an opportunity to review progress and to learn how you can improve your mentoring approach; are the adaptations you are making to your style paying off. Giving praise on an ongoing basis is also important for neurodivergent individuals, who may have low self-esteem and anxiety as a result of previous negative experiences.

We all fit somewhere on the spectrum of neurodiversity, so we all have our own strengths and challenges, our own communication preferences, social preferences, etc. Ultimately, a mentor needs to create an environment where mentees are comfortable and can develop the best possible relationship and fulfil the potential that their unique strengths and talents can bring.

Ref CIPD – Neurodiversity at work.

https://www.cipd.co.uk/Images/neurodiversity-at-work_2018_tcm18-37852.pdf