



IBM - Australia

How Neurodiversity in the Workplace Drives More Innovative Business Decisions

Company Information

IBM operates in more than 170 countries, making them the world's biggest IT and consulting services business. Inclusion is in IBM's DNA and has been for the last 108 years. IBM's CEO says 'IBM thinks about diversity the way we think about innovation; both are essential to the success of our business. When we innovate, technology becomes smarter for clients and creates new opportunities for growth. When we incorporate diversity into our business we create better innovation and outcomes. IBM has embraced diversity, and it gives opportunities for IBMers and our clients to achieve their full potential.

Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is a concept where neurological differences are to be recognised and respected as any other human variation. These differences can include those labelled with Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Dyscalculia, Autistic Spectrum, Tourette Syndrome, and others

Neurodiversity' refers to the diversity of the human brain and neurocognitive functioning. As such, neurodiversity encompasses individuals who are 'neurotypical' and 'neurodivergent'. Neurodivergent people have one or more of the above (and possibly other) neurological conditions. The conditions share common features, in particular, differences in how people learn and process information. Whilst a neurotypical person's brain functioning is aligned with the prevailing idea of what is considered 'normal' functioning, a neurodivergent individual's neurocognitive functioning differs from this 'norm'

The Programme

The current statistics reports that 1 in 50 people are autistic – but their unemployment rate is 6 times the rate of those without autism.

IBM Australia's initiative was to roll out a neurodiversity programme, hiring people with autism to fill variety of IT roles, taking the opportunity to bring uniquely talented individuals into their workforce.

The project consisted of the following stages:

- Planning
- Sourcing
- Staff awareness workshops
- 4- 6 week assessment phase

- Ongoing support for new hires and current staff

50 applications were received and 16 candidates commenced IBM's pre-employment training and assessment programme run by Specialisterne, a global social enterprise which connects autistic applicants with employers.

The programme allowed participants to gain a good understanding of what it would be like to work for IBM and IBM gained insight into the technical skills suitability and individual needs of each candidate.

The Selection Process:

- Video link explaining what IBM does and what is involved in different roles
- 50 applications received
- 30 attended a one-day workshop (10 each day over 3 days).
- Workshop involved work activities and games
- 16 selected to attend assessment/training programme lasting 4 weeks which involved weekly challenges and tasks mimicking those in the workplace

Successful candidates were invited back for a debrief session and offered the job across various roles in the company including testing, application and software development, data analytics, networking and cybersecurity.

The Challenges Faced

The main challenge was to rethink the recruitment and onboarding process, making the necessary adjustment needed in order to give a person with autism a fair chance of success. The face-to-face job interview has been a staple of the recruitment process for decades, but it is one area that IBM could adapt for neuro-diverse candidates.

Those who are unemployed and are neuro-diverse, around one third said they are unable to attend interviews due to anxiety. Since neuro-diverse individuals exhibit differences in their social interactions and communication, they often don't perform as well in the traditional recruitment as it relies more on rapport building and verbalising the individual's skills and experience.

By working alongside Specialisterne, IBM were able to leverage the skills of those who identify as neuro-diverse and better understand what they will bring to

the workplace. This process helped IBM more fully evaluate what reasonable adjustment might need to be made to allow neuro-diverse employees thrive and be successful.

Our View On Inclusion

The world needs different kinds of minds to work together. For those on the neuro-diversity spectrum it is about respecting and valuing the fact that they see the world differently – not a disability. The social dynamics around neurodiversity are similar to the dynamics that manifest around other forms of human diversity. These dynamics include unequal distribution of social power; conversely, when embraced, diversity can act as a source of creative potential.

IBM Australia's programme aimed to harness the advantages of neurodiversity whilst recognising that not all individuals on the spectrum have the same strengths, and everyone's experience is slightly different. Some of the unique skills and capabilities that these employees bring to IBM include: an eye for detail, thinking outside of the box, an eagerness to learn in areas of interest, accuracy, an ability to complete repetitive tasks, punctuality, and reliability in the workplace as well as exceptional memory and creativity.

Innovative Actions Taken

Prior to the programme commencing, Specialisterne worked with IBM to build the organisation's capacity and confidence through a series of autism specific training and awareness programmes. These programmes included several general autism awareness training sessions and tailored leadership training for the hiring managers.

- Training for entire Ballarat team on working with neurodiverse people
- Helping hiring managers understand the unique strengths of their new employees
- Setting up the environment to support neurodiverse people – workplace accommodations
- Learning to manage/interact with Neurodiverse people e.g.
 - Clear and concise communications
 - Tasks broken into steps and priorities set

- Verbal instructions and written instructions
- Clarity on role requirements and workplace expectations
- Providing schedules in advance – for preparation and processing of information
- Who to go to for different questions/issues

Evidence of Impact

- Following the programme IBM hired 10 employees with autism at its Client Innovation Centre in Ballarat, joining the growing trend of neurodiversity programmes in the workplace. The Successful candidates worked across various roles in the company including testing, application and software development, data analytics, networking and cybersecurity.
- IBM is the first organisation in Australia to pilot a neurodiversity programme, but it is also planning to launch the programme in Canada, Brazil, Argentina and Japan.
- *IBM were able to source amazing talent (very suitable to the required roles) whilst breaking new ground in the push for a more diverse and inclusive workplace.*
- The impact of such a programme was solidified when IBM Australia received the following feedback:

Happy tears mostly.

I don't know if you can pass my message on to Belinda, in your Ballarat offices, but I have just seen the ABC item on work opportunities for those on the Autism Spectrum, and I needed her to know she's quite possibly made my year.

My 10 yr old son has just been diagnosed with Aspergers (now known as high functioning autism of course), and whilst he continues to be the amazing child he was yesterday, I am obviously having thoughts about his future.

All he's ever wanted to do is engineering, and reading this article today has been so reassuring.

I realise we live a long way away, in Sydney, but I will continue to keep IBM on our radar, and hope that this kind of opportunity is rolled out across the country.

I have this idea that it would be so energizing and inspiring for children like Leo to see these jobs exist - our school has a mentoring programme within the gifted and talented unit, I am wondering if I can find someone locally doing anything like this...

Anyway, thank you with all my heart. I know it's one company (but what a company!), and one office, but I can explain to Leo about his neurodiversity - you've provided a positive ending/ life goal that will inspire and excite him.

All my best,

- IBM, in partnership with Specialisterne and other providers, plans to create 300 new jobs for individuals with Autism globally.