



# *A review of Neurodiversity in the Workplace: Interests, Issues, and Opportunities*

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## ABSTRACT

How can organizational ombuds support inclusion and equity for neurodivergent constituents in our organizations? Are there ways in which our practices could be modified to increase access for individuals across the spectrum of neurodiversity? While not specifically written for an ombuds audience, *Neurodiversity in the Workplace: Interests, Issues and Opportunities* (Bruyère & Colella, 2022) provides a valuable collection of essays on the topic of neurodiversity from an industrial-organizational psychology perspective, including strategies for furthering organizational equity, inclusion, and access. This article summarizes the key contributions of the text, including key terms and definitions, organizational climate considerations, disability rights and accommodation principles, and challenges within interpersonal and supervisory relationships. The author contextualizes the book within a case study, guiding ombuds to connect the core concepts of the book to organizational ombuds practice.

## KEYWORDS

Neurodiversity, disability rights, universal design, inclusion

## STARTING WITH AN EXAMPLE

Before exploring the insights provided by this text, I wanted to begin with a brief case study, which I hope will reinforce some of the insights gleaned from the book. Let's explore a case involving two employees in an interpersonal dispute. Employee A met with the ombuds and shared that they felt that another employee, Employee B, was harassing them and had considered filing a formal grievance with the organization's Human Resources office. The behaviors of concern included prolonged staring, inability to acknowledge or abide personal boundaries, and other "odd" interactions that put Employee A on edge. The ombuds received permission from Employee A to engage with Employee B to explore both sides of the conflict. Upon consultation with both visitors, the two agreed to an informal resolution to address their concerns, specifically facilitated dialogue (informal mediation) with the ombuds present as a neutral. Leading up to and during the mediation, Employee B shared that they had Autism, which led to difficulties in understanding and abiding certain social cues. They had not disclosed their Autism previously due to fear of being ostracized and marginalized at work. Employee A, upon hearing this during the dialogue, was surprised by the disclosure. Employee A shared that while they were sympathetic, they did not understand what Autism had to do with the harassment they felt they had experienced.

## NEURODIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

The concept of neurodiversity, particularly in a workplace context, is a nascent but rapidly evolving area of professional practice and scholarly inquiry. *Neurodiversity in the Workplace: Interests, Issues, and Opportunities* (Bruyère & Colella, 2022) fills a necessary gap in information on the intersection of neurodiversity and work life. Written from an interdisciplinary posture but focused primarily on industrial and organizational (I/O) psychology, this volume is composed of multiple research studies, each constituting a chapter. The chapters range in theme from recruitment and retention of neurodivergent employees to navigating the intricacies of human and civil rights laws and the requirement to accommodate employees with disabilities to cultivating wellbeing and social inclusion. While the text itself is helpful in understanding the ways in which neurodiversity impacts work life, management practices, and employee relations, the book does not directly address interpersonal conflict nor the critical role that an organizational ombuds can serve in supporting employees who may be experiencing conflicts around neurodiversity. Additionally, the chapters primarily reference the United States context particularly as it pertains to disability law, though those who work in international and multinational organizations will still find value in the recommendations.

Neurodiversity is defined herein as the multiple, complex ways in which human brains input and process information and engage in social interactions (Bruyère & Colella, 2022). The neurodiversity paradigm challenges social assumptions about what constitutes "typical" neurological or cognitive development, instead proposing the creation of spaces which embrace an infinite number of neurological differences (Walker, 2021; Baumer & Frueh, 2021). The neurodiversity paradigm asserts that neurodiversity is normal, that there is no "right" or "wrong" type of neurological or cognitive functioning, and that dynamics of social power influence who is included and who is excluded on neurodiverse lines (Walker, 2021). It encourages a shift to a strengths-based focus, as the "recognition of this human variation in terms of neurodiversity rather than in terms of disorders that preclude participation in the workplace has important implications for workers and organizations" (DeNisi & Murphy, 2022, p. ix).

Under the umbrella of neurodiversity, there are multiple terms used today which warrant definition. *Neurodivergent* – a term developed by Kassiane Asasumasu in 2000 – refers to having a mind which diverges from the dominant societal standards of "normal" (Walker, 2021), such as might be the case of individuals who live with psychological, learning, and/or neurological disabilities. Neurodivergent may also be used as a term of identity for those who "claim and

celebrate their neurodivergent condition as something inseparable from their identity” (Volpone, Avery, & Wayne, 2022), an inextricable part of who they are. The related term *neurodivergence* refers to the state of being neurodivergent. *Neurotypical* refers to neurocognitive functioning that aligns with the dominant paradigm of normality (Walker, 2021). One may also encounter the term *neurominority*, which represents the ways in which individuals have been minoritized for falling outside the dominant, neurotypical paradigm (Bruyère & Colella, 2022). While some neurodivergence may coincide with disabilities, the term neurodivergence is not synonymous with disability and the two should not be used interchangeably (Bruyère & Colella, 2022).

Individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorders, dyspraxia, dyslexia, dyscalculia, and any other number of neurological differences have been historically excluded from work life, resulting in extraordinarily high levels (upwards of 80-90%) of underemployment and unemployment (Volpone, Avery, & Wayne, 2022). This fact warrants additional attention as it pertains to systemic and organizational barriers to recruitment, retention, and inclusion of neurodivergent employees. To complicate matters, media play on social stereotypes and tropes of the “savant” person with Autism as main characters that push a narrative of exceptionalism even while increasing societal awareness of neurodivergence (Volpone, Avery, & Wayne, 2022).

In June 2020, the Board of Directors of the International Ombuds Association (IOA) voted to affirm the Association's first Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) framework, prioritizing building transparency and equity, strengthening diversity, and enhancing feelings of belonging throughout the Association and the ombuds profession (IOA Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Committee, 2022, August 3). Neurodiversity is a critical component or organizational diversity, though it is often forgotten about in broader DEIB discussions due to the invisibility of most neurological disabilities. *Neurodiversity in the Workplace* provides a useful exploration of various workplace practices through the lens of neurodiversity which will benefit organizations as well as ombuds professional practice.

## AREAS OF INTEREST TO ORGANIZATIONAL OMBUDS

I want to focus here on a few insights from *Neurodiversity in the Workplace* that I think deserve more attention in ombuds practice. While the text covers substantial ground across multiple workplace topics, all of which can be useful to the organizational ombuds, here I chose to focus on organizational climate, disability rights and accommodation, and interpersonal and supervisory relationships.

### ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE

While written from the human resources management (HRM) perspective, Chapter 2 discusses the need to create organizational climates which support neurodiversity broadly and neurodivergence specifically. The authors provide specific examples of strategies to bolster organizational climate across HRM domains, such as:

- enhancing selection procedures to ensure accessibility and targeted recruitment of neurodiverse individuals,
- open support for employee accommodations,
- open and frequent discussion and training on topics related to neurodiversity, and
- job-crafting, to include environmental design (low-traffic office spaces, flexible scheduling, and changes to lighting and sound management, for instance).

The ombuds serves the role of organizational change agent, identifying and elevating organizational issues to prevent recurrence (Wagner, 2000). However, an ombuds cannot recognize organizational climate issues to which they are not attuned. Just as HRM systems



should engage in ongoing training and development around issues of neurodiversity, so, too, should the organizational ombuds. For instance, an employee complaining of the lighting in their office may seem to some as just a disgruntled employee, but an ombuds can probe deeper into the nature of the concern, and perhaps identify that the underlying concern is that the type of lighting in an office space is causing visual overstimulation, or that the fluorescent lights emit a sound that is distracting to the employee. Identifying that neurodiversity may be part of the cause for concern will help the ombuds identify suitable options, including coaching the employee on requesting accommodations, identifying applicable policies and procedures, and exploring other ways in which the employee is experiencing the workplace, including barriers to their sense of belonging and effectiveness.

Another way in which the ombuds can play a role in shaping organizational climate is to work with managers and supervisors to understand the needs of neurodiverse employees. The authors discuss supporting leaders in building authentic leadership skills rather than visionary or transformational leadership, which can be “too abstract to provide guidance to employees that think in more specific ways” (Volpone, Avery, & Wayne, 2022, p. 33). Leadership style can have a significant impact on employees’ sense of inclusion, so coaching leaders on identifying new approaches and strategies may help foster a greater sense of belongingness among neurodivergent employees. The ombuds can also coach leadership on their ethical responsibilities pursuant to relevant disability rights laws, support the development of communication strategies for connecting with neurodivergent employees, and challenge stereotypical or stigmatizing assumptions.

#### DISABILITY RIGHTS, ACCOMMODATIONS, AND UNIVERSAL DESIGN

Related to the former example is the need for ensuring disability rights are upheld by the organization. It is critical that any discussion related to disability “treats neurodiversity as difference, not a deficit” (Doyle, 2022, p. 267) so that employees are empowered to bring their whole selves to the workplace. Since many forms of neurodivergence, such as Autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia, are considered disabilities in countries which incorporate neurological and learning disabilities into their definition of disability, it is important for ombuds to understand the legal and ethical responsibilities of an organization with respect to neurodivergence.

While disability laws globally increasingly align with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities of 2006 and recognize the ways in which the social and built environments exclude neurominorities, there is still much work to be done (Doyle, 2022). Across the member states of the United Nations (n=193), only about half of countries currently deploy statutes that guarantee reasonable accommodations to disabled employees, though the process by which employees may seek accommodations will vary by country depending upon the type of disability (physical vs. emotional or sensory) and how that country defines reasonableness (Heymann, Wong, & Waisath, 2021). In a United States context, for instance, this statutory authority might include the Americans with Disabilities Act and any state-level disability laws and the interactive process for requesting a disability-related workplace accommodation (Patton, 2022). In many countries (53%), however, it continues to be perfectly legal to compensate disabled employees differentially to their nondisabled counterparts (Heymann, Wong, & Waisath, 2021).

Standard organizational ombuds practice includes ensuring the fair and equitable application of policies and processes while identifying ways in which organizational policies might inadvertently exclude groups of employees. To do so, ombuds should familiarize themselves with how their organization operationalizes their commitments under relevant human and/or civil rights laws and identify gaps in implementation or application. Since civil rights laws set the floor, rather than the

ceiling, of what an organization must do, even in the absence of legal requirements to prevent discrimination and to accommodate disabled employees, an organization may adopt policies extending similar protections. In addition, ombuds may encourage employers to develop various support structures, such as employee resource groups or specialized recruitment programs, which can support neurominorities in obtaining and maintaining employment, building community and connection, and navigating organizational issues.

When it comes to workplace accommodations, there is no “one size fits all”. Any review of accommodation requests must be unique to the particular circumstances of the individual requestor, since not all individuals with a specific disability encounter the same barriers in the workplace. The authors point out that individuals with Autism may be higher performing employees and less likely to be perceived as needing accommodation (Patton, 2022, p. 191), which may lead to challenges with managers’ willingness to engage in the interactive process. It is important, however, to keep in mind that workplace accommodations generally benefit holistic team morale and that accommodations create a level playing field – not special circumstances – for the requesting employee. Lastly, accommodation may be necessary during the entire employee lifespan, starting with recruitment and interviewing. Ombuds can encourage requests for accommodation by building accommodation language to their own practices. For instance, an intake form may ask if an employee needs accommodation to fully participate in the ombuds meeting and then ask for specific accommodation needs.

But what if an organization were designed to already include neurodivergent individuals? This is where a Universal Design (UD) approach can be helpful to an organization. UD involves “creating infrastructure with all abilities and diversity in mind [in order to] reduce the need for adaptation or accommodation at an individual level” (Doyle, 2022, p. 270). The author identifies seven principles for engaging in UD:

- (1) *Equitable Use*: Organizations should ensure that employees are not segregated or treated differently due to disability, even if the intention behind a program seems to be noble (such as a hiring program that targets individuals with Autism for a specific job line, which may lead to isolation).
- (2) *Flexibility in Use*: Organizations can provide flexibility at the front-end of the employee experience, such as advising the employee of adjustments that are available in the use of technology, environmental layout, and scheduling.
- (3) *Simple and Intuitive Use*: Organizations tend to err on the side of complexity, so streamlining processes and information, using accessible (plain) language free of jargon, and avoiding unnecessary repetition can benefit all employees.
- (4) *Perceptible Information*: When creating materials to disseminate information, organizations should be attentive to deploying the information in accessible, multimodal formats that can be interpreted, if needed, through assistive technologies like screen readers. All too often, a well-intentioned employee creates a PDF to disseminate information throughout the organization but does not use accessible design principles to ensure the use of alternative text on images, screen reader compatibility, or ensure that fancy design elements do not deplete access. Therefore, additional training in accessible information design may be needed.
- (5) *Tolerance for Error*: When errors or mistakes inevitably occur, organizations can build systems that ensure the opportunity to correct them, including processes that allow prospective employees to modify their employment applications if errors were made or providing training opportunities rather than discipline to employees who make incidental mistakes.
- (6) *Low Physical Effort*: This principle involves minimizing the effort needed to complete various tasks and recognizing how different employees have different needs with respect

to wayfinding, physical coordination, and sensory input which can be met through flexible work arrangements, thoughtful role design, and workplace supports.

- (7) *Size and Space for Approach and Use*: Finally, organizations should focus on adapting environments and workspaces to ensure accessibility, such as offering options for accessing a service (via app, phone, or video, and not just face-to-face), creating appropriate physical environments to minimize disruption and acoustic interference, and being attentive to how and when processes such as performance management are engaged.

Organizational ombuds can improve the quality and accessibility of their services by taking a UD approach as well. For instance, offering varied modalities to engage services, such as video or phone calls, use of texting or app communication, and face-to-face allows an employee to select the modality that best meets their needs. Additionally, universally designing communication from an ombuds office ensures access for all. This may require additional skill development or resource use on topics such as assistive technology, designing accessible video or print materials, and checking language use to ensure that all employees can understand what is written or shared (such as using a Flesch-Kincaid score to check language accessibility).

#### INTERPERSONAL AND SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIPS

Interpersonal and supervisory relationships continue to create substantial traffic for ombuds offices. Neurodivergent employees can be misunderstood, criticized, or excluded by their colleagues (Longmire & Taylor, 2022), which can deplete belonging and promote isolation and increase interpersonal conflict. For instance, if an employee has difficulty in navigating social interactions in the workplace, this can lead to various misunderstandings among coworkers, particularly if employees are not trained to understand conditions such as Autism. Without this understanding, employees with Autism or other neurodivergence may not disclose their disability to their colleagues, further creating a sense of invisibility and isolation (Longmire & Taylor, 2022). Disclosure may also be associated with stigma-threat, where employees with Autism, for instance, are stigmatized as not being a good “fit,” or even being threatening to other employees’ sense of psychological safety. However, the authors highlight research that not only points to the social benefit of disclosure in creating awareness, but correlate disclosure with job stability and access to accommodations. Understanding how neurodivergence can inform social interactions can help an ombuds be nimbler to addressing issues as they arise and supporting individuals more effectively who find themselves in conflict, particularly around social cues, or neurological differences. When relationships are damaged, it can be difficult for some employees to recognize the deterioration. Since repair is often based upon understanding abstract social dynamics such as trust, social norms, or cultural rituals, an ombuds can provide additional coaching and support to translate these abstract constructs into concrete action plans, thus supporting employees in restoring broken relationships.

Managers may have little understanding of neurodivergence which can impact the way that they manage their employees. This can translate into performance management concerns, such as holding employees accountable to abstract or tacit norms, challenges in managing interpersonal conflict, or failing to acknowledge a disability that may require accommodation. Ombuds are situated to coach managers on meeting the needs of all their direct reports, including those who are neurodiverse. The ombuds may facilitate getting the manager connected to opportunities for additional training and development or helping the manager see the way in which their practices may not meet the needs of their employees (whether or not they are neurodiverse). They may also coach managers to understand how their leadership style may not be accommodating of all employees and working to develop a leadership style that supports the creation of highly effective teams inclusive of neurodiversity (Chapter 6 covers leadership theories in greater detail).



## LET US RETURN TO OUR EXAMPLE

Revisiting the example that we started with at the beginning of this article, how might the ombuds have prepared for this case? Consider the insights from *Neurodiversity in the Workplace* as a guide. Perhaps from the onset, the ombuds could facilitate openness to hearing about an employee's disability through messaging in their marketing materials, offering accommodations ahead of the first meeting with a visitor, and educating themselves on neurodiversity to be better equipped to understand the complexities of the experiences of neurodivergent employees. Ahead of the mediation, the ombuds could ask each employee about any environmental barriers to effective communication or engagement and ensure that the environment was accessible to both employees. Additionally, the ombuds may have been able to provide coaching to both employees about navigating communication around neurodiversity. With this information, Employee A may come to the realization that their actions to draw boundaries with Employee B may have been too subtle and nuanced to be recognized. Employee B may be able to ask Employee A about their boundaries and suggest ways to help the responding employee abide those boundaries.

There are, of course, real implications should the conduct be harassing in nature. Disability does not excuse behavior, and thus is not an excuse for harassment. However, conduct which may be misperceived or misinterpreted due to the impact of neurodivergence may be addressed at a lower-than-formal level, leading to greater understanding, reciprocity, and reconciliation. Providing guidance and support in navigating conflicts through the lens of neurodiversity, an ombuds can work to foster interpersonal and organizational inclusion and belongingness that will benefit all employees and the organization at large.

*Neurodiversity in the Workplace* (Bruyère & Colella, 2022) provides actionable, insightful information regarding neurodiversity broadly and tangible strategies for organizational practices that foster inclusion and respect for neurodiverse employees. This volume is a great starting point for an ombuds who is seeking to better understand neurodivergence and its impact on their practice. The text also provides guidance to organizations who wish to cultivate a greater sense of inclusion for neurominorities, improve the quality of their hiring and onboarding practices, and adopt policies and practices which support the inclusion of all employees.



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