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The Benefits Of Neurodiversity In Leadership

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The benefits of neurodiverse leaders
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Despite making up [15-20% of the global population](#), neurodivergent individuals, those with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, or other cognitive variations, remain severely underrepresented in leadership roles, even though there are major benefits to having neurodiversity among leadership positions. This gap is even more pronounced for neurodivergent women, who often go undiagnosed and face unique barriers to advancement.

Recent data from the [UK's Office for National Statistics](#) highlights only 22% of autistic individuals being employed. Additionally, [50% of UK managers](#) admitted they won't hire neurodivergent individuals. Those employed don't get their desired positions, as they're [wrongly assumed to be only qualified for specialist, subordinate, or isolated roles](#) within their companies.

Yet, organizations that embrace neurodivergent leaders are discovering significant competitive advantages. A [report by McKinsey & Company](#) shows diverse teams outperform homogeneous ones in profitability by 36%, and neurodivergent leaders bring distinct strengths that drive innovation and growth.

How Neurodiversity in Women Leaders Is Being Overlooked

Neurodivergent conditions like autism and ADHD have long been associated with males, but recent numbers highlight neurodivergence in both sexes. Nearly [80% of autistic females](#) remain undiagnosed by age eighteen. As a result of this lack of understanding, the neurodivergent traits present in women are missed or masked for decades. This [explains why boys are diagnosed](#) with ADHD at a three-to-one ratio compared to girls and are four times more likely to be diagnosed with autism and twice as likely to be diagnosed with dyslexia. In addition, [current diagnostic tools for Autism Spectrum Disorder \(ASD\)](#) are built around male behavioral patterns, leaving many girls and women to manage their conditions without proper diagnosis or support.

There's a large gap between the lived experience of neurodivergent women leaders and the perceptions of those experiences held by neurotypical people. For instance, some leaders have been thought to have character flaws when, in reality, they're struggling with an unrecognized aspect of their neurodivergence. The pattern repeats the more successful women become, including CEOs, who have had their concerns dismissed by doctors based on the assumption that professional success rules out neurodivergence.

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These cases point to the business world's failure to recognize neurodivergence in women. When women exhibit traits including intense focus, direct communication, or unique organizational patterns, they are often criticized or prevented from getting the support they need.

The Business Case for Neurodiversity in Leadership

Despite the misjudgment neurodivergent women encounter in the workplace, they bring distinct advantages to leadership roles when supported. These advantages translate to value that will benefit the business in the long run. There [are instances where traits like ADHD](#) enable professionals to process multiple situations simultaneously and spot potential outcomes others may miss. What gets labeled as scattered thinking in meetings often masks an ability to manage multiple complex challenges simultaneously, a crucial skill in today's fast-paced business environment.

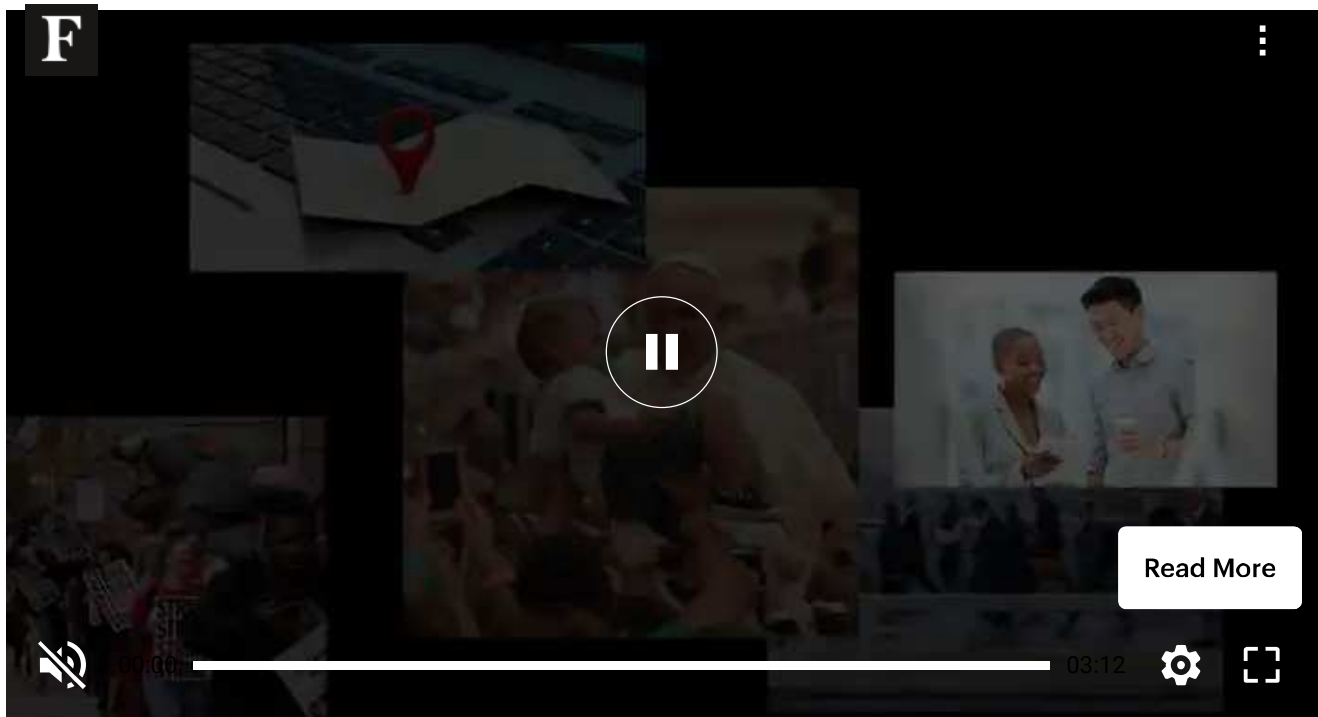
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[EY's internal studies in 2023](#) found that teams with higher percentages of female partners achieve both higher revenues and margins. Through EY's 23 Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence globally, neurodivergent professionals have developed solutions resulting in millions of service provision hours saved and nearly \$1 billion in value creation.



Even major corporations are starting to recognize these advantages. JP Morgan Chase launched its [Autism at Work](#) program in 2015. It started as a five-person pilot program that saw remarkable success. Within six months, those first neurodiverse employees demonstrated 48% higher productivity than their neurotypical counterparts who had been at the company for three to ten years. The Autism at Work program has since expanded to hundreds of employees across 40 different roles in nine countries.

Similar success stories have emerged from other major companies. SAP's [Autism at](#)

[Work initiative](#) has achieved a 94% retention rate among neurodiverse employees. Goldman Sachs' [Neurodiversity Hiring Initiative](#), launched in partnership with [Specialisterne](#), achieved a 100% offer and acceptance rate in its first virtual class, demonstrating how these unique perspectives strengthen organizational capability.

Neurodivergent leaders, especially neurodiverse women leaders, bring valuable perspectives and capabilities that enhance organizational performance. Their different ways of processing information, solving problems, and leading teams aren't just beneficial but are increasingly essential for success in a complex business environment. Organizations that recognize and support these unique capabilities will gain significant competitive advantages in innovation, efficiency, and team performance.

Encouraging Neurodiversity in the Corporate World

Businesses need concrete strategies to create truly inclusive environments where neurodivergent professionals can thrive to benefit from the innovation these individuals can bring:

Rethinking Traditional Hiring and Promotion Procedures to Include Neurodiversity

A complete overhaul of traditional hiring processes is required. Standard interviews prioritizing social skills over technical abilities, skillsets, and experience often screen out talented neurodivergent candidates. Progressive companies are now implementing performance-based hiring methods that focus on practical skills and actual job requirements.

This means:

- Redesigning job descriptions to focus on essential functions rather than broad social requirements
- Creating skill-based assessments that measure actual job capabilities
- Implementing structured interviews that evaluate technical competencies
- Providing accommodations as needed as well as clear, specific feedback throughout the hiring process

Building Neurodiversity Leadership Support Systems

Success starts at the top. Companies showing real progress in neurodiversity inclusion have implemented specific leadership accountability measures. EY's approach of evaluating leaders on inclusive practices using standardized global metrics sets a clear standard for others to follow.

Effective support systems include:

- Training managers and executives to assess technical skills versus social skills appropriately
- Creating sponsorship programs where advocates support neurodivergent professionals
- Establishing regular check-ins focused on clear performance expectations and feedback
- Developing metrics that measure inclusive leadership practices

Creating Psychological Safety to Include Neurodiversity

Building a genuinely inclusive environment goes beyond formal policies. Companies need to create spaces where neurodivergent professionals feel safe being themselves.

Key steps include:

- Implementing company-wide education programs about neurodiversity
- Developing practical toolkits for managers and teams
- Organizing events that highlight the advantages of cognitive diversity
- Creating clear channels for feedback and concerns
- Providing accommodations such as flexibility, quiet rooms, private offices, or smaller collaborative spaces

Establishing Career Development Pathways

Many neurodivergent professionals face invisible barriers to advancement due to outdated leadership stereotypes. Businesses need to create clear, accessible paths for career growth that account for different working styles and strengths.

This involves:

- Collaborating with neurodivergent employees on individualized development plans
- Providing mentoring and coaching opportunities
- Including neurodivergent employees in leadership development programs
- Regular talent evaluations that focus on outcomes rather than traditional leadership styles

Measuring and Maintaining Neurodiversity Inclusion Progress

Companies need concrete ways to measure their progress in neurodiversity inclusion. This isn't just about hiring numbers – it's about retention, advancement, and contribution.

Effective measurement includes:

- Tracking retention rates of neurodivergent employees
- Monitoring career advancement patterns
- Measuring the impact of neurodivergent teams on innovation and productivity
- Regular feedback from neurodivergent employees about inclusion efforts

The adage “this is how it’s always been done” is a great way for companies to stay small. Embracing neurodiversity within employees and leaders is a great way for organizations to grow, scale, and become top industry leaders. The companies that do, time and again, have excelled in productivity, innovation, risk reduction, retention, employee engagement, and revenue generation.

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