**Fostering inclusion of employees with autism spectrum disorders (ASD): Effects of an educational intervention on workplace attitudes in a service center environment in the Netherlands**

Stream 13:

Organizational Disability Inclusion: Looking Backward & Living Forward in the New Normal

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**Background**

Although people with autism spectrum conditions (ASD) are often well educated and highly capable, many struggle to find and maintain meaningful employment. As a result, autistic people face disproportionately high rates of unemployment. It is estimated that only 1 in 3 autistic people have a job (Autistica, 2022), which is lower than employment rates for other disability groups. Prior studies report that neurodiverse employees, including autistic people, commonly experience micro- and macroaggressions in the workplace and difficulties during social interactions with colleagues (Härtel *et al*, 2019). Thus, one barrier to greater inclusion of autistic employees is addressing attitudes and stigma in the workplace. Inclusive HR practices, such as educational initiatives, may have a positive effect on beliefs and attitudes about ASD, leading to improved recruitment and retention of autistic employees and better experiences for autistic employees themselves.

Our study provides multi-level insights on autism awareness and acceptance in the workplace from an individual perspective (co-workers who completed autism awareness training), managerial perspective (the head of department who conducted the awareness training), and organizational perspective (human resources management function). Thus, this paper contributes to the understudied field of neurodiversity, which includes autism, in organizations (Hennekam *et al*, 2023).

**Methods**

***Study setting***

This mixed methods study was conducted in the context of a service center for a global medical device supplier and servicing organization located in the Netherlands. The service center is part of a larger facility with over 150 employees, several managers, and one director overseeing operations. According to the company’s website, it has an “unwavering commitment to inclusion, diversity, and equity (ID&E)”. Notably, the company has worked with a specialized recruitment service for the purpose of hiring autistic people to fill open roles.

***Survey of employee awareness and attitudes about ASD***

Existing employees at this firm were contacted by email and invited to complete a 36-item survey about knowledge and attitudes toward ASD based on prior research on a similar research topic (Nicholas, Mitchell, Zulla, & Dudley, 2019) and assessed five areas: (i) prior exposure to ASD, (i) organizational awareness of initiatives to support employees with disabilities in the company, (iii) personal mindsets and beliefs around ASD, (iv) concerns about working with someone with ASD, and (v) comfort level interacting with someone with ASD. After participating in an evidence-based educational intervention, the same employees were invited to complete the survey again. Changes in survey responses were analyzed to gain insights into effects of this short, low-cost educational intervention on understanding and attitudes about ASD.

***Interview with manager***

The head of the department was interviewed to gain insights into their experience of working with the specialist recruitment agency, onboarding autistic employees, administering the educational intervention, and changing the company culture. The interview was conducted over MS Teams and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The interview was transcribed to allow for analysis of emerging themes.

**Results**

***ASD awareness and attitudes among employees***

Of 122 existing employees invited to complete the initial survey, we received 48 responses (participation rate of 39%). Of these, 13 employees (27%) reported knowing someone with an ASD diagnosis. The majority of respondents had not had any ASD-related training in the past 2 years and were not aware of the company’s inclusive hiring policies.

After the ASD educational intervention, 21 employees (17 men and 4 women, which is representative of employees in the study setting) completed the follow-up survey. Comparison of pre- and post-survey responses for this group showed that the training session led to more correct responses about the characteristics of ASD, including awareness of social and communication challenges. Concerns about having someone with ASD in the workplace decreased (e.g., concerns about productivity, safety, and the ability of people with ASD to complete the necessary work), while comfort levels of hiring, working alongside, and coaching an autistic person increased. Importantly, one of the largest improvements was in employees’ confidence that they have knowledge or capabilities to accommodate the special needs of co-workers with ASD.

***Interview with manager***

***Preparation phase***

The explorative interview with the head of department revealed a careful preparation of the hiring process of the person with ASD. The manager said *“It was very helpful for us to really have a lot of interactions with the specialized recruitment agency. Also looking into myself or my leadership team, we didn't have any experience professionally nor and the personal life with a person with ASD.”* The preparation process lasted for about 10 weeks.

***Onboarding of the ASD employee***

The interviewed manager highlights the crucial role of support structure for successful onboarding: “*I think the support structure is crucial. We came up with what we call the buddy system and we selected three people, that were going to be the buddies of the person with ASD. I think especially at the beginning, that's very important now basically that support structure is no longer there because the person with ASD is feeling at ease.”*

***Educational intervention***

According to the experience of the interviewed manager, two training sessions facilitated the integration of the ASD employee: *“first, a management information session to bring us up to speed on what is ASD, the different levels of ASD, how to interact with a person with ASD, etc. Second, during a monthly stand up meeting with employees where I shared the learnings of the previous information session. And also to explain how we were going to let's say create that support structure. That is basically what we did after we reviewed the results of the survey and the survey didn't raise any red flags. We ended the meeting with a Q&A session with employees.”*

***Company culture***

The head of department mentioned that the company culture is based on a strong commitment to DEI (diversity, equality, & inclusion): *“Inclusion, diversity which is super important for us in the company. We are already a very diverse team and then I say diverse in terms of I think we have 26 different nationalities.”* He further explained that no employee showed a negative attitude or expressed a concern about the integration of an employee with ASD: “*with regards to that diversity aspect [ASD], there was basically no one who raised the hand saying “Hey I have serious concerns when we onboard people with ASD.””*

**Discussion**

Our empirical results highlight the importance of the preparation of the onboarding phase with a competent partner like a specialized job agency or an advocacy agency (Hennekam, Follmer, 2024). These external job agencies accompany companies that would like to diversity their recruitment pools. They also provide training for HR professionals and managers in order to provide an inclusive recruitment process especially for neurodiverse profiles.

Our case demonstrates the importance of implementing a support structure e.g. in terms of a buddy system. Providing a smooth onboarding and integration process may enhance the retention rate of employees with ASD. Hennekam & Follmer (2024) explain that big companies like IBM, Ernst and Young, Microsoft or JP Morgan do have clear onboarding process for neurodivergent individuals. For example, IBM provides social activities and regular meetings to reduce social anxiety for neurodivergent employees. In our case, the company goes even beyond and provides regular informal and formal meetings for all employees e.g. regular interactions between the manager and the person with ASD in an informal context next to the coffee machine and formal monthly stand-up meetings with the whole team. Co-workers and managers act as allies for neurodiverse colleagues.

Similar scientific studies highlight the role of information within the recruitment process of autistic individuals (Comer *et al*, 2023). The results of the study demonstrate how information improves ratings of candidates on the autism spectrum. The authors show further that parasocial contact has no influence. Therefore accompaniment of autistic candidates and organizational decision makers is crucial to improve recruitment of ASD individuals. Our study shows further that an educational intervention can improve the onboarding process of autistic individuals. Successful onboarding depends on the quality of the induction process. Our study highlights the importance of ongoing training during the onboarding time which may last for one year. According to Hennekam & Follmer (2024), training programs help to raise awareness and also acceptance of neurodiversity in the workplace and they may reveal unconscious bias.

The empirical results confirm on one side the positive effect of an educational intervention on colleagues’ perception and attitudes. On the other side, our empirical study also highlights the importance of an inclusive work culture where employees with ASD feel safe. The organizational culture is embedded in an inclusive leadership style (Bourke, Titus 2019) where managers keep an “open door” policy, foster informal exchanges with employees with ASD and they stand up for the principle of inclusion. They are acting as a role model for all employees.

**Conclusion**

This study aimed to understand how an educational intervention can influence the beliefs, concerns, and comfort level of employees regarding having autistic employees in the workplace. As many autistic people face challenges related to social and communication skills, educational interventions can support organizations, managers, and co-workers in ensuring that autistic employees are included and supported in the workplace. Our findings provide real-world insights on fostering autism awareness in a workplace where teamwork is critical. Further studies will be needed to assess the value of this intervention when conducted on a larger scale and in more diverse workplace settings, as well as to determine whether increasing autism awareness in the workplace will influence the retention of autistic employees. Notably, there is growing business interest in autistic people - who are often unemployed or underemployed - as an untapped talent pool in modern workplaces (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Doyle and McDowall, 2022). With increasing awareness of neurodiversity, there is a changing perspective of autism as a disability to a normal form of variation in human thinking that often comes with unique cognitive strengths (Hunt & Procyshyn, 2024). Greater recruitment and retention of autistic employees has the potential to fill labor shortages while improving quality of life for autistic people. A crucial first step to this goal is to create a workplace environment that is understanding of the needs of autistic people.

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