

Skill Boosters transcript:

Neurodiversity – An Introduction

Dr Nancy Doyle – Founder, Genius Within/Co-director, Centre for Neurodiversity at Work, Birkbeck, University of London: So, neurodiversity is the idea that there is naturally occurring variation in the way humans think, that our neurology and our cognitive profiles are naturally diverse. In the same way that there's biodiversity across the whole planet, there is neurodiversity in the way humans think.

Dr Punit Shah – Associate Professor of Psychology/Director, GW4 Neurodevelopmental Neurodiversity Network: Neurodiversity is a new, and, I think, quite an exciting concept, a powerful concept, that's reframing a traditional way of thinking about neurodevelopmental disorders and conditions to focus on the strengths and celebrate the differences among neurodivergent people.

Dr Nancy Doyle: Neurodiversity isn't a synonym for disability, and neurodiversity isn't an umbrella term for the conditions that we tend to think of or associate with neurodiversity. Neurodiversity includes all of us, including neurotypical thinkers.

Dr Punit Shah: Part of neurodiversity naturally means that some people with a particular condition might experience very few difficulties, and function very well in society, and live independently and work independently, whilst on the other end of the spectrum, individuals, neurodivergent individuals, might well struggle, might need extra support, and might even struggle to gain and maintain employment.

Narrator: The term 'neurodiversity' refers to the naturally occurring variation in the way our minds work. Although the term also includes neurotypical thinkers, it is commonly associated with a range of conditions or neuro differences, such as dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or ADHD, autism, dyspraxia, Tourette's syndrome, dyscalculia, and others. These differences in the way our minds work can impact on how we process information, our mood, social interaction, and how we experience the world around us. Although in some people these differences can be debilitating, in others the impacts can be more nuanced. The important thing to remember is that no two people are alike, whether they have a neuro difference or whether they are neurotypical.

(Neurodivergent thinkers talk about their lived experience)

- I have dyspraxia, which is a learning difficulty that affects coordination and organisation. In my case, it means I'm really untidy.

- So, I'm diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, and I don't like the word disorder, but there's lots of other horrible words in the diagnosis stage.

- So, I have Asperger syndrome. I also have dyslexia and, it's not a disability as such, but I also have something called synaesthesia as well.

Elizabeth Takyi – Founder and CEO, A2i Dyslexia: So, I have dyslexia. Well, I was diagnosed with dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, and visual stress, also known as Irlen syndrome.

Dr Punit Shah: Some people do see their neurodevelopmental condition or neurodivergence as a disability, and disability isn't necessarily a bad word. Disability can be an incredibly useful thing to refer to, and in the sense that it's not something about them, but it might be something about society that is the disabling factor.

Dr Nancy Doyle: Do those differences have to be disabling? Not always. So, some of them are, some of them are objectively disabling differences, and people will be hindered by the level of overwhelm they experience in their senses, just trying to go about doing normal day-to-day activities. Other people will only be overwhelmed in their senses in certain scenarios. And so, in those scenarios they are disabled, and not in those scenarios they are not disabled.

(A neurodivergent thinker talks about their lived experience)

- You know, there are days when I'm completely disabled by the condition. I do think that whatever disablement I have is as a result of society, really, and external factors. Me, as an individual, on my own, I'm not disabled at all.

Elizabeth Takyi: For me, I call it a disability. Some people call it a learning difference. Some people call it a learning style. There's no learning style for me in this. It's a complete disability. It's a barrier to work, it's a barrier to information for me, it's a barrier to communication. So, for me, it's a 100% disability.

DRAMA: EVA'S SENSORY OVERLOAD

(people chattering and laughing)

(office equipment noises) (phone ringing)

Eva: What's going on? Has something happened?

Paula: Yes, we're all going to be hot desking. Yay!

Mo: We all have to put our stuff in lockers.

Mitch: I know what you're going to say, and, yes, I was going to tell you about it, but we only found out yesterday.

Paula: And you were working from home.

Dr Punit Shah: The most commonly reported challenges are sensory issues in terms of office set-up, in terms of noise, lighting, fluorescent lighting, those sorts of sensory factors that can be difficult.

Dr Nancy Doyle: The open-plan office doesn't work for many people, but it is really disabling for neurodivergent thinkers. So, neurodivergent thinkers tend to have hypersensitivity. We hear more than neurotypical, we literally are hearing more. And so, a noise around us in the office that might be very easy for a neurotypical person to ignore, we can't ignore because it's louder for us.

DRAMA: EVA'S SENSORY OVERLOAD

Paula: Yeah, here she goes again. (scoffs) Little tantrum.

Mo: I bet he caves so she doesn't have to do any hot desking.

(woman breathing heavily)

Dr Punit Shah: There are several strengths that neurodivergent people are theoretically able to bring to the workplace. Now, the research on this is quite mixed and it's a really exciting area of research.

(A neurodivergent thinker talks about their lived experience)

- I feel like analysing patterns, I'm really good at, which is really helpful for the role that I'm in because it means I can take something away and have a look, and say, "Actually, have you considered doing this because I've noticed this, this, and this?"

Elizabeth Takyi: We are problem-solvers, we're empathetic, we've got great communication skills in that sense. And everybody needs people like that in their organisation.

Dr Nancy Doyle: There's lots of data on entrepreneurial flair for neurodivergence, so we all know the very famous tech entrepreneurs and people who happen to be autistic. And then there's the ADHDers and the dyslexics. Some research has suggested that as many as 35% of US business owners are dyslexic compared to 10% in the population. So there's something going on there.

Dr Punit Shah: It's really about sort of seeing that person as an individual rather than making assumptions about their strengths based on pre-existing stereotypes or theories. The broad benefit of hiring neurodivergent people, just as there is with other forms of diversity, is that diversity, generally speaking, is an incredible strength for an organisation, just as diversity is a strength more broadly in society.

Dr Nancy Doyle: Reasonable adjustments need to be individual and personal. There's a lot of kind of standard reasonable adjustments, things that most people find helpful, such as flexible hours, such as text-to-speech software or speech-to-text software.

Dr Punit Shah: Broadly speaking, these plans are created with the neurodivergent employee or the disabled employee, sometimes with support from clinicians, in trying to think about exactly which adjustments might be required to help them perform well within the workplace.

Dr Nancy Doyle: We can give you a tick list of 'These things tend to be helpful', but a reasonable adjustment plan needs to be worked through at the individual level. And it needs to really carefully consider the demands of the job, the environment that person's in, and the skills that they've got. And you need to look at all those three things and say, "Right, which strategies are gonna work for this person?" And then you capture them, and they become an expectation that individual has that they can take if they get a new manager, if they move to a new department or a new job, they can take those expectations with them.

Elizabeth Takyi: Some people, for example, like myself, when I worked in corporate, I went with my dyslexia assessment from uni. So that's already there to say that this and this is what I need, but even that, I still may need a workplace needs assessment because what I get from university and the support I may get from work is two different things.

DRAMA: PATRICK'S LATE DYSLEXIA DIAGNOSIS

Grace: So, how are you doing, Patrick?

Patrick: Not bad... considering. I didn't think I'd be ticking the dyslexia box at this stage in my life.

Grace: You know, today is just an informal chat about what might make things easier for you, so we know what sort of measures to put in place.

(Neurodivergent thinkers talk about their lived experience)

- I'm allowed 15 minutes late into work, up to, so that I can walk in any time between, say, 9 and 9:15 and then flexible time at the end of the day. So I can make that up as well. And that just takes the pressure off me. Everyone knows why I'm late. It's not because of any general tardiness, it's because my brain is physically unable to manage its time.

- It may be, at some point, that I do need to be dealt with down the performance management route. That's fine. If I'm not performing in the role that I'm being paid to do, then I wouldn't expect anything else from that. I don't expect any special treatment. All is we expect, and I expect, is a bit of a level playing field, really. So, if there's things that I would struggle with, that some measures are put in place to enable me to sort of overcome those.

Dr Punit Shah: It's really important to revisit that plan, whether it's annual performance reviews, whether it's more frequently. It's something that's likely to be in flux that's going to be very different from when the employee starts in a particular organisation to once they become a bit more involved in the organisation. So it's important to revisit and refine the plan with the employee.

Dr Nancy Doyle: We do a thing with all members of staff. We say, "How can we support you to work at your best?" And just that question, "How can we support you to work at your best?" Just stop there. Everyone can be asked that question, whether you have a disabling condition or not. And every manager and employee relationship can benefit from learning what someone's strengths and weaknesses are.

Narrator: For performance reviews and appraisals, it's important to explore with the individual any areas in which they may struggle. You may want to tailor the objectives specifically to the individual, taking into account their differences, as some of the objectives

might be extremely difficult for them to achieve. Ensure that any reasonable adjustments have been in place for some time before the review and consider revisiting them if required. And remember to focus on the positives. A development strategy built around a person's strengths is always the best approach.

Dr Nancy Doyle: Your customers and the people you provide a service for, they're neurodiverse. Neurodiversity is everywhere. So if your team are only neurotypical, you're only designing for neurotypicality and you're missing a huge part of the population that could be part of your organisation's provision.

Dr Punit Shah: So, while some of these terms, these topics, or these concepts of neurodivergent and neurotypical might work its way into everyday parlance, and it might be useful, and some people might prefer to use those terms, it's important to keep in mind that, actually, it might sound a bit cheesy, but we're all human. We all fall under that spectrum of human variation. And neurodiversity, as a concept, is going some way to remind us of that fact.

(A neurodivergent thinker talks about their lived experience)

- We can all see how society is getting far better at integrating everybody and accommodating everybody as we should do. So, I think it's just the start of a journey, really, for organisations and individuals.

Elizabeth Takyi: I mean, I'll stand on top of a mountain, and I will take a mic in Wembley Stadium with millions of people and say, "Do you know what? I have dyslexia. And I'll explain what that is. I have dyspraxia and I'm confidently taking it on board. I wear the label with pride. The label of dyslexia has made me who I am today. And without that, my diagnosis, and without the word dyslexia, I don't know where I'll be."

Dr Nancy Doyle: If we get people in that think differently, people that have specialist and unusual thinking skills, we're gonna give ourselves an edge. We're gonna come up with ideas that other people haven't thought of and we're gonna more accurately reflect the people that we're serving with our business and services.

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