

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You're listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim editor in chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Every brain works a little differently, and it's those differences that make us unique. A growing number of employers are realizing that those differences add untapped value and skills to the workplace and so they are actively recruiting from the neuro-diverse community. Joining me today to discuss this is Hiren Shukla, EY's Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader. Hiren, thank you so much for joining me.

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

Ramona. Thank you so much for having me today.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think neuro-diverse is a word that not a lot of people are familiar with at this time. And I think it would be good if we started out explaining what someone who is neuro-diverse is, who does that encompass?

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

That is a fantastic question. And Ramona agree, this is a very new term and it's interesting how it is used today is not often the proper definition. So let me step back for a moment. Neuro diversity represents all of the different thinking styles cognitive approaches that exist in the world. And there are two main categories under neuro diversity. There is the majority of the population in the world about 80% that are considered neuro-typical, meaning as we grow up and as we integrate in the world and conform in thinking styles, there is some sort of an alignment of how we can understand each other and maybe even nuance and things of that nature. So this is the majority of the world. About 20% of the world are considered neurodivergent, and divergent means they have an inherent cognitive difference.

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

And this is often in terms of diagnoses such as dyslexia, autism, ADHD, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, and it is really the neurodivergent population that has been missing in how we think about the world and solutions and approaches and from my standpoint, as an employer trying to drive innovation. And it's in that dimension of diversity neurodivergent individuals that really are now being much greater involved in the neuro-diversity discussion. So an individual is not neuro-diverse, an individual is either neuro-typical or neurodivergent. But neuro-diversity really represents what happens when you get a multidimensional diverse team to produce incredible results.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I think that is so important to understand that, because again, even for myself, I've read a lot about this over the last, I would say 12 to 14 months. And that nuance, that difference is really an important part of the conversation that I don't think HR people are having or the general population is having. What was your epiphany moment when you kind of saw this differences connection and started thinking, we have to figure out how to get neurodivergent people into our workforce?

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

So Ramona, I have no personal connection to the neurodiversion world, but when we're thinking about innovation, which is my remit at EY, how do you build innovation capacity to re-imagine the future, to disrupt yourself today, to challenge status quo, to harness the power of data and emerging technology. And it was very interesting that the default place that I, and I suspect the majority of the world is coming from when they think about neurodivergence is we think about Dustin Hoffman in Rain Man. We think about all the nice young man or woman that bags my groceries in the supermarket. And you're really thinking about the deficits and you're thinking from a disability perspective. The chasms that I have to close, and I think most of us is, is what we think we see on the surface, there's a lot more going on below the surface.

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

You don't judge a book by its cover, as they say, Ramona. And for me, what really triggered deep interest was as I'm diving into how to build innovation capacity, I am listening to the characteristics of neurodivergent individuals and dyslexia or ADHD. Oh my God, your brainstorming and creativity is off the charts. When we think about individuals who are autistic, you often will think about their ability to hyper-focus into something, which means they like something, they don't like it a little bit, they like it a lot. And so they expand their energy towards those things while other areas like eye contact or making small talk are probably not their strengths.

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

And Ramona, this was the light bulb that went off and it was, I think I described it once before, I felt like the clouds parted and ray of sunlight just came right down on my head because I thought, how is this possible that you've got millions of people around the world, 20% of the world population is a large amount, that are misunderstood on the fringe of the workforce and yet their contribution capability potential and particularly in areas where creativity, agility, resilience is needed more than ever. And this was pre pandemic. We were thinking about this Ramona, which as you know today the pandemic has only exacerbated the need around being more agile. Resilient. And we think about when we reframe the lens by which we look at neurodivergent individuals, they have had to be resilient their whole lives. They've had to figure out the quote unquote hacks when they need to learn something as they may not digest information in the same way others would and so they'd have to figure things out.

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

And what intrigued me very much was, could there be an intersection by which you do good for business but you do great for the world. And it almost sounded too good to be true, but I'll tell you the sense of belonging that I think each and every one of us desire is something that I thought, boy, I don't have a position, just be an ally around neurodiversity as in its true form, creating powerful multidimensional teams but as an employer, I have the power to actually make a difference and that got me up in the morning and that made me think transforming business, process, data, technology, and lives and families at the same time, oh my God, who wouldn't want to do that?

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So one of the things you just mentioned, when someone is neurodivergent maybe they have autism or any other number of neurodivergent conditions, they have a hard time looking at someone, they may have a hard time communicating. So that could stop the hiring process in its tracks because I think we are used to that eye contact, we're used to that relationship when we go in for a job interview or do it

over Zoom now. So how does the hiring process change? What kind of questions do you ask? How do you understand what skills are available in that person?

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

It is such a wonderful question, Ramona, because that was literally the basis of when we asked ourselves, why is the unemployment rate at 85%? What is going on here? And I think you've captured some of the essence of individuals that are neurodivergent, autistic individuals, dyslexic individuals, they will think and speak and act a bit differently. Not all of them, that's a generalization. I bet there's many that we've all met and we have no idea that they're neurodivergent. But a number of individuals will go through a traditional behavioral based interview process where you're sitting across a desk or a screen and you are given kind of like pop quiz and you're supposed to think on your feet and you're supposed to build rapport, have small talk and really, quote unquote, sell yourself. Well, you realize selling yourself in an interview is very different than being a high performer on the job.

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

And so we began to look at, what if we subtracted all of these behavioral based assessments and we pivoted more towards a performance based assessment where we get to observe individuals and actually see, is this an environment that they will thrive in, that they enjoy and is this something that they are coachable with. And that was really the ability that we have now at EY that allows us to screen individuals in who on paper or in a face-to-face setting may not look or act like these are strong data and technology, artificial intelligence engineers or solving complex problems, but when we invest that time upfront to observe them and coach them, we often find that the quietest voices have the most powerful ideas if we give them the space and a psychological safety to be themselves. And that was the difference Ramona, which is now allowing EY and other employers to start thinking and challenging status quo in their own hiring processes and start thinking about how do you access talent in a manner that is really going to add a new dimension to your workforce.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

So how do you change that process, that hiring process then? Do you have an example of what kind of questions that may be asked now or what kind of skills based assessments that are maybe happening now?

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

Ramona, we have now at EY developed a four step process where we remove all the ambiguity, all the surprise questions away from the process. And it does take about a week to do this process, which a lot of employers would say, oh my God, I don't have a week to do this. And our question is, if you spent a week and got 92% retention of your workforce, is that something worth it? And I would, hands down, say, yes. 92% retention is well worth the time upfront, where you are getting to know the individual by building a sense of trust and telling them here is the entire process that we're going to take you through no surprises. We would like you to do an assessment individual. We are going to send you this assessment and you do this on your own free time, we're not watching over your shoulder.

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

And we're then going to walk through that assessment with you to determine how you did in following instructions, what is your creativity in solving problems, how well did you apply technology, what did you make of the data that you had there and all of this is around again, complex problem solving skills,

critical thinking analytics that we would want all of our future focused employees to have. The last piece of what we changed is a week long group process, it's called SuperWeek at EY. And we get a cohort of anywhere from 15 to 25 individuals. And we take them through a week long facilitated session, we've done it live over the pandemic. We've hired 60 individuals all virtually using obviously virtual platforms. And in that week long, SuperWeek, we are doing technical assessments, we're doing group exercises.

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

We're helping to build confidence with coaching individuals. And we're saying, we believe in you and we think this is an area that we'd like to see you speak up a little bit more on or how do you team better and communicate better. And we're hoping to start seeing individuals who want to make that effort to say, I may not be all the way there yet quote unquote, I don't have to sell myself, but I'm bringing my true self into this interview process so EY or any other employer, if you want me here's what you're getting from me and vice versa. We want to do the same thing, here's what our environment is, this is what we're going to ask from you and it becomes a very transparent process.

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

But I think Ramona, all of those steps that doesn't account for eye contact, it doesn't account for how witty you need to be in the process or who you know, none of these things matter, it all matters what is your acumen, your aptitude, your interest and your potential. And when those items line up, we say, oh my God, this is an employee that we want to invest in. They don't need to have a cultural fit but they need to generally want to be here and that's how we're going to work together to start off our relationship.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Has this led to a change in the culture internally at EY with other employees? How are your other employees who are already there coached to integrate this new team member?

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

Such a beautiful question, Ramona. It is absolutely amazing how EY today, our total population is 300,000 employees in 700 cities, 150 countries around the world. We have 150 of these team members that have come through our centers of excellence in the US primarily, now India, Canada, soon to be Poland, Spain, the UK, Costa Rica and we are expanding tremendously. But that group of 150 is like, how do I say this? It's like a diversity inclusion equity and belonging amplifier. I mean, what they represent, which is a cross section of diversity of age, race, of sexual orientation. It is a microcosm for diversity everywhere which is why, Ramona, our global population of 300,000 at EY are so galvanized around the changes they see us making by bringing team members in that our neuro-typical employees want to learn.

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

They don't want to just integrate team members in by saying, this is how you should act, this is how you should behave but it's how do we create a new teaming model by which all of us age, race, gender, sexual orientation, cognitive diversity, that we're really bringing ourselves in. And what's been great is we've not had to push that information out. We are literally receiving, oh my God, emails and calls, and a swelling of pride that is galvanizing those that are directly impacted or affected around neurodiversity or neurodivergence in their family and those that have nothing to do with this who say, I want to learn,

and that's the best type of change because we don't have to force it, we actually are just facilitating that.

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

And I think the secret of this Ramona is we have addressed neurodiversity head-on. We've not beaten around the bush, we've not sugar coated this, we've not avoided it. We have called this out very directly, not to label anybody and never to make anybody feel that they have to be a poster child, but to say, if we don't look at something directly and speak to it, how do we acknowledge this individuals in our population to say, we see you, we hear you, we value you and we want you to be a part of a discussion. And frankly, it's not just the neuro-typical setting the agenda of the discussion, it is what would you like to talk about? And then let's have a discussion from there.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And at the bottom line of this [inaudible 00:17:22], you're tapping into a talent pool that has been ignored or has been misunderstood because nobody knew how to communicate with some of these individuals. So what has the impact been on your business? What has been the impact on your innovation by now tapping into these skills?

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

Ramona, I'm so appreciative you asking this question because it highlights the why for us. The why wasn't corporate social responsibility, it wasn't just a DNI effort and oh, we want to recognize this population, there's no charity or philanthropy involved here. It was a business imperative that drove us to say, we need to create the highest performing teams that will catapult us into the future to build solutions for our clients that are distinctly agile and resilient. And the bottom line has been over \$500 million of top line and bottom line savings, it's been brand and reputational capital that has gotten us on CBS 60 Minutes, PBS NewsHour. And often business would often be profiled on major news networks not for something that they've done good but something that's gone bad so it's beautiful to see business driving change that trickles into communities.

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

And the digital solutions that our team is building is literally blowing us away from not only a dollars perspective, our team has saved our clients over 1.9 million hours of man hours by rethinking process, applying emerging technology like artificial intelligence or data analytics, and by challenging status quo from a dimension that we've not had previously. So as you're probably hearing from me at 92% retention, why is EY's global chairman, Carmine Di Sibio, and our America's managing partner Kelly Grier are so jazzed up about what we're doing, because they believe that when EY says we're going to build a better working world, this is a literal direct example of creating exponential value for our clients, our employees, and our communities.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You've sold me. If I'm neurodivergent, how are you recruiting me now? How do I connect?

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

ey.com has lots of information on how to connect with us. I personally receive resumes via LinkedIn, just called parents, uncles, aunts, friends, individuals themselves, at least two or three times a week. We

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work with non-profit organizations. We work with the Office of Services and Students with Disabilities on campus at university, we're working with state and government vocational rehab agency. We would love for individuals to very directly contact us. We respond to every single inquiry that we get. We don't care if your resume is one line, because we know there's a lot below the surface, and we've already proven that and seen it multiple times over to know you cannot judge a book by its cover.

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

And frankly, when you have all of these requirements, Ramona, in the job description that says masters in computer science or business analytics and three years of experience and great communication skills, and we say, that's the kitchen sink that you ask for? There's no person in the world, very few that will meet that criteria. But if you take the time, invest in people, the return you get back is tenfold. So we'd love to hear directly through LinkedIn, through ey.com, through submitting resumes directly to us. But anyone listening to this would like to feel a sense of, I want to learn more on what's happening as you are kind enough to have me today, we want to shout this from the rooftops and share this with the world.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And we'll help you share that. Thank you so much Hiren, I really appreciate you joining us.

Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader:

Thank you, Ramona.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've been speaking with Hiren Shukla, EY Global Neuro-Diverse Centers of Excellence leader. I'm Ramona Schindelheim editor in chief of WorkingNation. Thank you very much for listening.