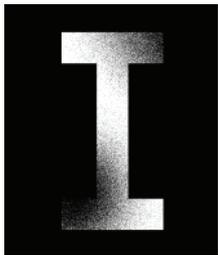


The Economics of Inclusion:

Diversity Isn't Black and White — It's Green

By Amber Baird, Alex Daly,
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How hiring for diversity and inclusion can boost your bottom line.



Issues of racial inequality, inequity, and social justice took center stage in 2020 and have continued into 2021. From protests over police shootings to disparities in COVID-19 testing in minority communities, race and inequality have moved to the forefront of a national dialogue and forced many Americans to

rethink their views on systemic racism and social (in)justice. These issues have also forced companies — including those typically silent on social or political issues — to address and take a stand on cultural diversity and inclusion. As a result, the business community is tackling diversity with a new seriousness and commitment, while individual companies are wasting little time changing policies and hiring teams to recruit and retain a more inclusive workforce.

For example, NASDAQ will now require the boards of its member companies to maintain a minimal level of diversity, including at least one woman and one director who self-identifies as an underrepresented minority or LGBTQIA+. Taking it a step further, NASDAQ is also lobbying the SEC to create and enforce a policy that requires both public and private companies to disclose information about the diversity of their boards and leadership.¹

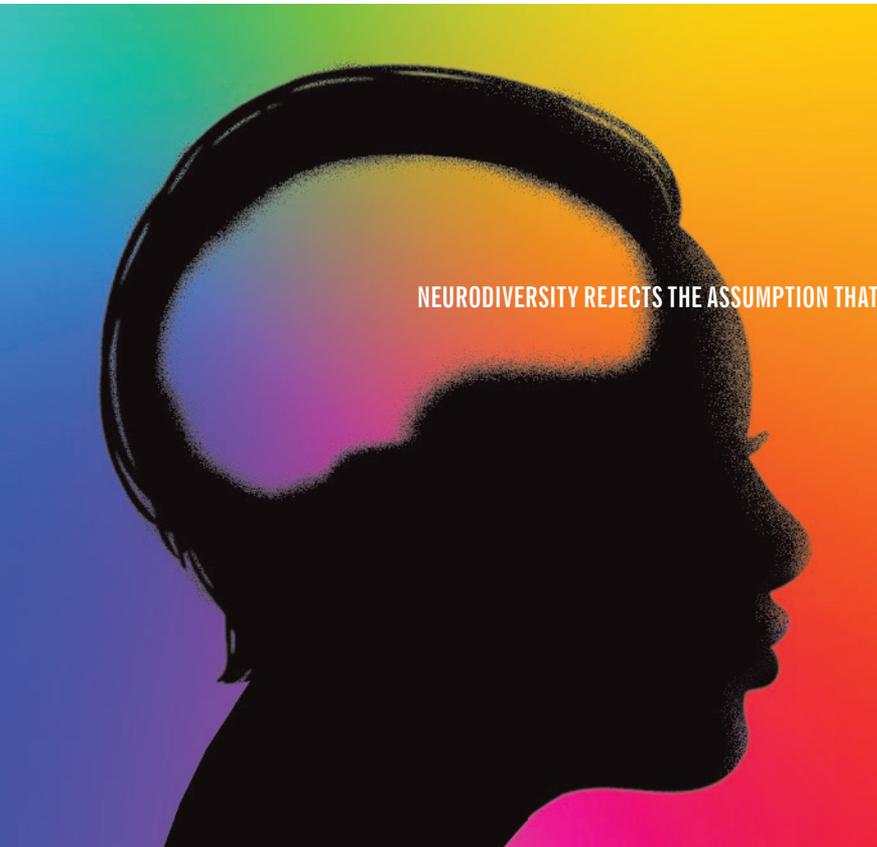
While most companies focus on hiring more women and people of color, smart executives recognize that there are other underrepresented groups they can target to add unique perspectives to their companies. Companies that maintain open, flexible views on diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace benefit from the innovative thinking and unique

perspectives of a neurodiverse, intergenerational, socio-economically diverse workforce. Additionally, a workforce that is diverse in multiple dimensions is more reflective of a diverse, global, multidimensional customer base. Here are four ways to consider expanding the definition of diversity in your hiring strategy.

GREAT MINDS THINK DIFFERENTLY: LEVERAGE “NEURODIVERSITY” TO GAIN A COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE.

The business community has long encouraged “out-of-the-box” thinking — at least, in theory. In practice, the way that most companies hire, onboard, and train their employees does little to celebrate or encourage people who are different or who think differently. For example, conditions such as dyslexia, autism spectrum disorder (ASD), social anxiety disorder (SAD), and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) have long been stigmatized in the workplace. Only recently has the practice of hiring employees who “think differently” become more accepted among management.

Neurodiversity is the idea that dyslexia, ASD, ADHD, and other conditions are natural variations in the way human brains take in and process information. It rejects the assumption that some brains are “normal” while others are not. And it posits that we are all unique, processing information and responding to stimuli in different ways. While hiring employees diagnosed with dyslexia, ASD, and ADHD may present challenges, doing so also comes with benefits. For example, research has shown that people with ASD demonstrate strengths working with computer languages and identifying small details in complex patterns, skills well suited for detecting bugs in code. Some studies



NEURODIVERSITY REJECTS THE ASSUMPTION THAT SOME BRAINS ARE “NORMAL” WHILE OTHERS ARE NOT.

have also identified above-average spatial reasoning in people with dyslexia, potentially making them a good fit for engineering or graphic design positions.² Companies that fail to harness the talents of these employees miss out on the opportunity to work with and learn from an innovative, largely untapped workforce.

The unemployment rate within the neurodiverse community is high, around 80 percent. And many of those who do find jobs are underemployed.³ While the business community may not have always embraced neurodiversity in the workforce, some industries have recognized the benefits of different ways of thinking earlier than others. For example, the neurodiverse community has been welcomed and encouraged in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). And from medicine to academia to IT, open-minded employers have benefited from the ways that neurodiverse employees perform when it comes to problem-solving, innovation, or analytics.

At Dell Technologies, what began as a training and internship program grew into the Autism Hiring Program in 2018. Dell piloted the program intending to enhance the career readiness of potential employees on the autism spectrum. The benefits, however, have stretched far beyond the original goal. Not only has the company converted some of its interns to employees, but the program has led company executives to rethink their entire interview process.

The program successfully uncovered skilled workers with a keen attention to detail and a commitment to quality. It also revealed barriers that traditional interviews pose for both neurodiverse and neurotypical candidates. Dell found that its interviews didn't focus enough on skills and gave too much weight to cultural and behavioral fit — especially for positions that required attention to detail or technical skill. Rethinking the hiring process from the perspective of the neurodiverse community forced hiring managers to focus on what truly matters instead of reinforcing social and behavioral norms that had no bearing on job performance.

When recruiting neurodiverse employees, companies must recalibrate their talent acquisition process to focus on technical skills over social behaviors or “soft skills,” and to take into account issues such as auditory processing or anxiety — both of which can make the interview process stressful and difficult for potential employees on the autism spectrum.^{4,5} These interviews often ask candidates to perform a technical skill (e.g., coding) to illustrate their fit rather than having them engage in an extended conversation that can be stressful for a neurodiverse candidate who is otherwise wholly qualified to do the job.

Companies that are willing to think outside of the [hiring] box and develop adaptive hiring practices will find themselves with a more diverse, creative, and productive team that capitalizes on the full talents of neurodiverse individuals.

THE VALUE OF EXPERIENCE: WELCOME AN AGING WORKFORCE

Federal laws prohibiting age discrimination have been on the books since 1967, but age discrimination remains a problem in corporate America. In an AARP survey of employees over 45, more than 60 percent reported seeing or experiencing age discrimination.⁶ Unfortunately, as employees age in a society that values youth, older workers are falsely perceived as less competent and less valuable in the workplace.

These assumptions — which too often go unchallenged — impact hiring, firing, and promotions. As a result, older employees are passed over or pushed out. Some miss out on opportunities because they were never considered, and older applicants are often filtered out as “overqualified.”

There are, however, numerous benefits to hiring older employees. They are often able to leverage deeper experience, having more time to practice and master skills that younger employees are still learning. Older employees retain a business’s culture, traditions, and undocumented processes. More mature employees have had time to establish professional networks, leveraging those networks in ways that benefit their companies. Older employees can tap into those networks to get advice or find other seasoned professionals to act as collaborators.⁷ They have also had time and exposure that allows them to build and test best practices, building the reputation of the company along with their personal brands. Older workers play a critical role in training the next generation of workers. In addition to serving as mentors and trainers themselves, they can leverage their networks to connect younger workers with colleagues who can provide invaluable guidance.

On the flip side, younger employees often have new ideas because they aren’t limited by their experience (“we’ve always done it that way”) and can bring fresh perspectives from new technologies, social platforms, and peer groups. But by hiring a mix of older and younger employees — in essence, creating an intergenerational workplace — organizations can take advantage of each age group’s strengths and leverage them to create a more welcoming, high-performing workplace adept at catering to employees and customers of all ages.^{8,9}

BREAKING THE CLASS CEILING: ADDRESS WEALTH DISCRIMINATION

Social class often determines not only the access a person has to education and professional opportunities, but also one’s exposure to different life and work experiences. Class

bias runs rampant in the professional world, from screening resumes for ethnic-sounding names, to searching a candidate’s address,¹⁰ to assuming an applicant’s social class based on speech patterns.¹¹ Some hiring processes disadvantage candidates from a lower socioeconomic background.

Meanwhile, companies that rely on a pipeline of unpaid interns to fill full-time roles are limiting their candidate pool to only those who have family money for support.¹² This not only has the obvious downside of limiting economic mobility — and therefore the American Dream¹³ — but it also hampers business success. Companies with modern talent acquisition strategies that remove social class determinants (e.g., names from resumes), focus on diversity and inclusion in recruiting, and offer competitive salaries will attract a more diverse pool of candidates from all socioeconomic levels.

“Social class transitioners” are people who have climbed between socioeconomic classes and have an acute ability to put themselves in others’ shoes and improve innovation, customer experience, and employee experience.^{14,15} Organizations that demonstrate more flexibility in their candidate profiles and create welcoming spaces for social class transitioners through mentoring and sponsorship programs will bring different perspectives and ideas to their companies. Those that hesitate to hire these individuals because of an artificial social class descriptor do so to the detriment of their futures as innovative companies.

FOCUS ON FAIRNESS: GIVE “SECOND CHANCE” CANDIDATES A REAL SECOND CHANCE.

The goal of diversity and inclusion is true equity, with everyone having equal opportunity to succeed. That’s no less true in society than it is in the business world. Unfortunately, due to existing systemic inequalities such as unconscious bias and racism, there are numerous barriers to fairness within the recruiting and hiring process. As a result, there are fewer economic opportunities for so-called “second chance” candidates.¹⁶

Ex-offenders are a good example of potential employees left on the sidelines due to biases in hiring, and they account for a largely untapped talent pool that can bring unique skill sets to the workplace. Once a person is entered into the criminal justice system, it is incredibly difficult for them to rejoin the “legitimate” economy — there are too many policies, both formal and informal, that work against ex-offenders.^{17,18}

In truth, rehabilitated ex-offenders tend to be much more loyal than the average employee,¹⁸ as these employees feel an obligation to look out for the companies that were willing to extend them grace. In that same vein, organizations are far less likely to experience turnover with these individuals, as loyalty, coupled with limited prospects, means that they remain in positions longer than others on average. Many of these candidates will have lived experiences rooted in entrepreneurship that allow them to understand a customer base, instill a sense of ownership in their departments, and help to creatively solve problems that help open new lines of business.¹⁹ Furthermore, hiring ex-offenders is evidence that your company “walks the talk” when it comes to nondiscriminatory practices.

Being open to hiring those with previous convictions may greatly expand the applicant pool. At least 7 million people have been imprisoned at some point in their lives.²⁰ That means that ex-offenders represent a large pool of talent for employers to consider. This fact is especially relevant for industries facing labor shortages, and ex-offenders can bring skills to organizations not only from their lives before

incarceration but also because of skills or certifications they may have earned while incarcerated. Some prisons offer job training programs, which could mean a potential employee has already received job training or that the individual brings a specialized skill set. There may also be additional government incentives for organizations that hire ex-offenders. While these benefits vary from state to state, they can include tax credits, wage reimbursement, or training funds.

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: OVERCOMING UNCONSCIOUS AND SYSTEMIC BIAS IN HIRING

Companies that can investigate and overcome unconscious bias within their organizations, starting at the hiring phase, will be best positioned to harness the unique capabilities and skills that individuals across the broad spectrum of diversity bring to their economies and ours. But how can companies overcome unconscious bias in hiring? Where should they start? If these biases are systemic, how can we unravel practices baked into our companies and culture?

Companies can work to eliminate systemic bias in their hiring practices via the following steps:

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1. Investigate your hiring process from end to end. Document and discuss the process with your team. Review your job postings. Analyze each step for bias and reexamine the process from the perspective of a broad array of candidates.
2. Not sure if there's bias in the process? Check yourself and your hiring teams with Project Implicit (<https://implicit.harvard.edu/implicit/>) to see where personal biases may lie.²¹
3. Provide a preview of the interview process and anticipated questions in video form so candidates will know what to expect. This is particularly useful for candidates on the spectrum and allows them an opportunity to prepare and feel more comfortable in the actual interview.
4. Institute the use of blind resumes. Remove names or other identifying characteristics (e.g., school name, graduation year, etc.)
5. Consider adopting a “ban the box” policy; do not ask if a candidate has a criminal record unless it directly relates to the job itself or pertains to materials that a person in that position will have access to.
6. Provide a point of contact in case candidates need explanations or assistance in the hiring process. Make the process more welcoming and personal for everyone involved.

These practices, combined with a flexible interview approach that is inclusive of neurodiverse, socioeconomically diverse, intergenerational, or formerly incarcerated candidates will expand the talent pool and welcome diverse, innovative ideas that will help your company grow. ●

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