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BUILT FOR MORE OF US

Accessibility is often treated as a specialist HR topic, something activated when an employee discloses a disability or requests an accommodation. But what if designing work for people who function differently is actually one of the best ways to design better work for everyone?

FROM ACCOMMODATION TO BETTER DESIGN

When we design jobs, workplaces and management practices for a wider range of human needs, we often improve clarity, safety, productivity and well-being for everyone. Across HR, leadership advisory and DEIB work, the same question is useful: are we asking people to fit the job exactly as designed, or are we willing to redesign it so that more people can perform at their best?

Many workplace practices still assume an “ideal” employee: physically able, comfortable in noisy spaces, quick to process verbal information, socially confident and able to perform tasks in one prescribed way. Real people are more varied than that.

Research on disability-inclusive job design shows that a functional limitation can act as a spotlight on inefficient work. A request related to back pain may reveal that a lifting process is unnecessarily demanding. Sensitivity to noise may expose an office environment that distracts many people.

The important shift is from asking, “How do we help this person cope with the existing job?” to asking, “What is this telling us about the way the job itself is designed?” This changes inclusion from exception management into continuous improvement.

NEUROINCLUSION IMPROVES MANAGEMENT

The same principle applies to neurodiversity. Neurodivergent employees are not one homogeneous group. Their strengths, challenges and preferred ways of working differ, just as they do among neurotypical employees.

Yet many standard HR processes reward one narrow style of communication and behavior. Traditional interviews often favor quick verbal responses, eye contact and social fluency. But these are not always reliable indicators of whether someone can solve a complex problem, analyze data, lead a project or improve a process.

A more inclusive approach is also a more rigorous one. Give candidates clear information about what to expect. Ask one question at a time. Use practical or skills-based assessments where relevant. Focus job advertisements on essential tasks rather than inflated lists of personality attributes. During onboarding, explain unwritten rules instead of assuming everyone will absorb them. None of this lowers standards. It makes the standards more relevant to the work.

WHAT HELPS ONE, OFTEN HELPS MANY

Some successful workplace innovations began as accommodations. Captions help people who are deaf or hard of hearing, but also anyone joining from a noisy location or working in

a second language. Clear documented workflows support neurodivergent colleagues while improving knowledge transfer and onboarding across the team.

Structured brainstorming is another example. If every meeting rewards the fastest speaker, leaders may hear only a fraction of the intelligence in the room. Silent idea generation followed by discussion, anonymous digital input or structured feedback can create space for people who process information differently, are more introverted, or simply need more time to think.

The result is often not only greater inclusion, but better ideas. This is why disability inclusion and neuroinclusion should be seen not as isolated DEIB initiatives, but as part of better organizational design.

THE MANAGER IS THE CRITICAL LINK

Policies matter, but daily experience is shaped by managers. A company can have excellent DEIB commitments and still lose talent because a line manager communicates unclearly, interprets difference as disengagement, or treats an accommodation as an inconvenience.

Managers do not need to become medical experts. They need to become better listeners and better designers of work.

That means asking: What helps you do your best work? What creates

unnecessary friction? Do you prefer instructions verbally, in writing, or both? Is there something in the physical or digital environment that makes your work harder than it needs to be?

These conversations should respect privacy. Practical adjustments should often be possible without requiring disclosure. The neuroinclusion research similarly emphasizes that support should be individualized and that disclosure remains the employee's choice.

A LEADERSHIP AGENDA

For top management, inclusive job design is directly connected to business performance. It affects access to talent, retention, safety, productivity, innovation, employer reputation and leadership quality.

In retail and consumer environments, this can mean rethinking shift patterns, physical tasks, store or warehouse ergonomics, frontline communication and sensory load. In healthcare, where precision, fatigue and psychological safety matter enormously, clearer workflows and better-designed roles can protect both employees and patients. In NGOs, where teams are often lean and mission-driven, flexibility and thoughtful role design can make the difference between sustained commitment and burnout.

Strong organizations do not wait for a formal accommodation request

before improving work. They build feedback loops across the employee journey — attraction, recruitment, onboarding, development, performance and retention — and ask where unnecessary barriers exist.

START SMALL

Inclusive redesign does not have to begin with a major transformation programme. Start with one task that repeatedly causes frustration, strain, errors or exclusion. Watch how the work is actually done. Ask the people closest to it what gets in the way. Challenge assumptions about what “must” stay the same. Test one small, reversible change and measure whether it helps. This mirrors the research recommendation to treat accommodation requests as potential design leads and to experiment with practical changes close to the work itself.

This approach is practical, human and strategically relevant. It replaces the idea of the “ideal worker” with a more realistic understanding of human difference.

Designing work for people with disabilities or neurodivergent employees is not about creating a separate workplace for a minority. It is about creating a better workplace for more of us.

When inclusion is designed into work, everyone benefits.