Neurodiversity management in multinational companies – case study

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Abstract

The topic of neurodiversity management is a relatively new area of research in management and quality sciences. The term 'neurodiversity' itself was coined only in 1998. Since then, there has been more and more talk about the competitive advantage of companies employing neurodiverse [ND] individuals. Companies that are able to exploit the potential inherent in neurodiversity build strong, innovative teams capable of changing the world for the better. Managing a neurodiverse team requires understanding, acceptance and action to create an inclusive working environment. Nevertheless, it is an investment in the future with tangible benefits for both companies and employees.

Despite the benefits of employing neurodiverse people, the majority of these individuals are still rejected by the labour market. The main objective of this article is to identify good practices in neurodiversity management in multinational organisations implementing neurodiversity management programmes, to mention just a few like IBM, Microsoft, EY, SAP, Skanska. Two flagship companies were selected to be investigated in a case study analysis: EY and Microsoft, which even boast on their websites about their good practices and skills in the area of neurodiversity management best practices. EY belongs to the consulting sector and Microsoft to the IT sector, both of which are also active in Poland.

The study identified good practices for managing neurodiversity in multinational companies such as customised recruitment process, e.g. in the form of a hiring event, establishing internal support groups for ND employees, and creation of the organisational culture based on acceptance, tolerance and understanding. Following the results of the study, suggestions were made for companies to facilitate the inclusion of neurodiversity in order to create a working environment where both neurodiverse and neurotypical people can thrive, thus contributing to organisational success.

Introduction

Neurodiversity refers to the inherent diversity in human cognition, which is becoming a key factor in revolutionising approaches to work. Applying this concept is transforming the current attitude to recruitment, work organisation and team management. It enables major international companies to increase their productivity, innovation and competitiveness. At the same time, they build a working environment in which diverse types of minds can complement each other and realise their full potential. Neurodiverse individuals and various styles of neurodiversity management also form a substantial part of the organisational culture which is the main focus of management science [Szydło, 2020].

The concept of neurodiversity encompasses the natural diversity of the human mind and the ways in which it functions. Each of us has a unique way of seeing the world, learning and solving problems. Individuals with diverse neurological profiles, such as those with autism, ADHD or dyslexia, may exhibit different working styles, but at the same time possess a range of unique talents and skills. As the number of people diagnosed with autism is constantly growing [Tomczak, 2021] there is more and more neurodivergent human capital to be taken care of. However, academic literature still lacks contextualized, practical advice for employers and neurodiverse employees, and the science-practitioner gap is growing [Doyle and McDowall, 2022]. Thus, the author of this paper has decided to examine neurodiversity management condition in multinational organisations to come up with practical solutions based on the observed good practices.

The main research aim is to identify good practices in the area of neurodiversity management in two selected multinational companies: EY and Microsoft, within the framework of case study analysis in order to facilitate neurodiverse individuals' employment. The main method exploited within the framework is observation based on two principal sources: the results of the 2022 contest for the best Polish employer announced by one of the main Polish newspapers (EY)and relevant websites (EY and Microsoft). Clearly, the company viewed through the lens of the national-level contest was examined in the global-national context.

The article starts with theoretical background of neurodiversity and neurodiversity management, then presents case study analysis methodology in order to move on consistently to the practicalities demonstrating good practices related to neurodiversity management solutions implemented in the examined companies. Finally, the conclusions and practical recommendations are provided together with the suggested directions for future research.

The domain of neurodiversity management in current workplaces should not be neglected as it is not only a challenge for companies, but also a great chance to change the working world for the better.

1. Literature review

The autism spectrum and the concept of neurodiversity are considered inventions of the modern world, but they are very old concepts that Hans Asperger, an Austrian psychiatrist, proposed during his first lecture on autism in 1938 [Silberman, 2015, p. 23]. Until recently, probably due to the medical origin of the concept, it was common for neurodiverse conditions to be understood based on medical discourses of disability [Richards et al., 2019, p. 1905]. For instance, medical professionals and the wider public typically perceived Asperger syndrome people as deviant and incapable based on bodily and cognitive impairments [Krcek, 2013]. This demeaning medical perspective contributed heavily to the prolonged existence of negative, stigmatising and disabling stereotypes of neurodiverse people [Richards et al., 2019, p. 1906].

The major change of the approach occurred in the late 1990s. Firstly, the term 'neurodiversity' itself was created by an Australian sociologist Judith Singer in 1998 [Singer, 1998] in her study on autism, and popularized by US journalist Harvey Blume [Armstrong, 2011]. Secondly, the further emergence of 'neurodiversity' can be attributed to autistic people deeply offended by media reports of an 'autism epidemic' [Baker, 2011]. Since then, neurodiversity has been perceived as the diversity in human cognition, which is a natural phenomenon [Singer, 1999]. It can be defined as any kind of cognitive processing or ways of making sense of the world that deviates from 'typical' ways of thinking and being [Hendrickx, 2010]. According to the innovative concept of neurodiversity, disorders such as autism, dyslexia or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) should not be treated as deficits or dysfunctions, but as naturally occurring types of cognitive mechanisms with specific strengths that have contributed to the development of technology and culture [Silberman, 2015, p. 23]. It is also worth mentioning that the concept of neurodiversity inherently suggests that all humans vary in terms of their neurocognitive ability, but the terms such as neurominority, neurodivergent, or neuroatypical are umbrella terms for the subset of neurodivergent conditions, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, dyspraxia, or dyslexia [Doyle, 2020; Fung and Doyle, 2021] which imply that one's cognitive profile is not 'typical'.

The recognition of neurodiverse conditions as part of normal human variation [Paletta, 2013] along with the emerging strengths-based approach to mental disorders [Wiklund et al., 2020] and neurodiversity [Wiklund et al., 2018], where a focus is placed on a person's assets as opposed to weaknesses, provide the potential to include neurodiverse conditions within the management of diversity in organisations [Richards et al., 2019] even more so as neurodivergent individuals represent in total over 10% of the overall population [CIPD, 2018] and they are increasingly seeking employment.

Still, neurominorities is a specific group of employees who are often barred from work opportunities and experience significant levels of employment exclusion [Knapp et al., 2009; Krzeminska and Hawse, 2020]. For example, the situation in Poland seems to be particularly difficult as the employment rate of people with autism is only 2%, while in the European Union countries it is around 10% [Polish Economic Institute, JiM Foundation, 2022, p. 4], and its value is also the lowest when compared to the corresponding rate among all people with disabilities in our country [Wiater, 2023]. The exclusion might be the aftermath of certain neurodivergent personality traits posing the following challenges in the workplace: problems with effective communication, time management, task prioritizing and work organisation, as well as problems with stress management, emotion control and sensory sensitivity [Tomczak, 2020]. On the other hand, highly functioning neurodivergent individuals often possess unique abilities akin to human superpowers that are likely to make them excel in professional settings [Austin and Pisano, 2017]. For instance, autistic individuals often demonstrate above-average analytical thinking and attention to details [Annabi and Locke, 2019], whilst dyslexic and dyspraxic individuals tend to think innovatively [Everatt et al., 1999]. Another neurodiverse group, namely individuals with ADHD, have become successful entrepreneurs because of their extraordinary ability to multitask and remain calm under pressure [Antshel, 2018].

Despite limitations, neurodiversity appears to be an overdue candidate for inclusion in diversity practice, especially as there is increasing evidence of organisations already working towards recognising such differences alongside more conventional categories of diversity [Richards et al., 2019, p. 1906; Szydło et al., 2024] as is also the case with two organisations analysed within the framework of case study analysis in this research paper.

The observed research gap is the lack of a practical model of organisational neurodiversity employment and management procedures. The identification of good practices in the examined organisations might be a step forward in the prospective creation of such a model.

2. Methodology

This section of the paper serves to describe and discuss case study analysis as the main method used to achieve the basic research aim which is the identification of good practices in the area of neurodiversity management in multinational companies. Setting directions for further research will be directly derived from the results achieved.

The qualitative approach has been adopted taking into account the nature of the analysed data available, which is inherently descriptive as it has been taken from 2 different but still descriptive sources: 1/ the results of the 2022 contest organised by a leading Polish newspaper, the aim of which was to vote for the best Polish employer - data for EY provided in the global context, 2/ the Internet, precisely the analysed multinational company's website - data for Microsoft.

Case study is a research methodology, typically seen in social and life sciences [Heale and Twycross, 2018]. There are multiple definitions of case study research but, very simply, it can be defined as an intensive study about a person, a group of people or a unit, which is aimed to generalize over several units [Gustafsson, 2017]. A case study has also been described as an intensive, systematic investigation of a single individual, group, community or some other unit in which the researcher examines in-depth data relating to several variables [Woods and Calanzaro, 1980]. Researchers describe how case studies examine complex phenomena in the natural setting to increase understanding of them [Hamel, 1993]. Moreover, this method of research allows the researcher to take a complex and broad topic, or phenomenon, and narrow it down into a manageable research questions. By collecting qualitative or quantitative data sets about the phenomenon, the researcher gains a more in-depth insight into the phenomenon than would be obtained using only one type of data [Heale and Twycross, 2018].

It is advisable to choose entities as cases because cases are rather special [Stake, 2006, p. 2] whereas functions and general activities lack the specificity, the organic character, to be maximally useful for case study [Stake, 2005]. Thus, two multinational organisations have been selected as specific entities functioning in the role of cases in this research paper. To study a case, its functioning and activities need to be carefully examined, but the first objective is to understand the case and find out how the case gets things done [Stake, 2006]. By definition, the prime referent in case study is the case, not the methods by which the case operates [Yin, 1994]. For this reason, the situation of two selected cases has been studied in this paper in the light of the assumption that qualitative case study serves to study the experience of real cases operating in real situations [Stake, 2006]. Case studies typically combine data

collection methods such as archival searches, interviews, questionnaires, and observation [Eisendhardt, 1989]. The main method chosen for the needs of this research paper is observation of the contest results and relevant websites.

3. Research results

Two multinational organisations: EY and Microsoft (Table 1), have been selected as cases for observation in order to achieve the research results.

Tab. 1. Profiles of the examined companies

Name of company	Sector	Number of employees globally	Number of employees in Poland	Number of countries where the company operates
EY	consulting	300,000	5,000	150
Microsoft	IT	95,000	300	branches all over the world

Source: author's own sources based on the Internet.

The data for EY was mainly derived from the results of the 2022 contest announced by one of the leading Polish newspapers with the aim of voting for the employer operating in Poland, either national or multinational, presenting the best employment and management practices and solutions. 75 companies entered the competition and they were evaluated within five categories. Neurodiversity management solutions appeared within Category 5 related to ESG and sustainability bearing the following heading: For the implementation of ESG solutions - for employee engagement in sustainability processes, for transparent policies on employee communication, subcategory 2: other non-standard arrangements for staff. The starting point for the evaluation of the company's achievements in Poland was the presentation of its global experience in the field of ND management which was obviously transferred to the Polish labour market.

EY boasts about global non-standard programmes distinguishing the company as an equal opportunity employer, based on three main assumptions:

1. creating a culture based on inclusion and looking at people through their needs and potential,

2. utilising untapped talent to meet the demand for employees and specific types of work and to activate groups such as individuals on the autism spectrum and people with disabilities,

3. having a positive impact on society, the company itself, and the company's customers and fulfilling the company's mission of *Building a better working world*.

Neurodiversity Centre of Excellence (NCoE) is a unique EY's invention and it represents the company's global and Polish experience in neurodiversity management. NCoE is EY's answer to the challenges of the transformation era and specialises in promoting innovation and process improvement by using technology and automation to solve business problems.

The first centre was established in 2016 in the US and since then, others have been established in the US, South America (Costa Rica), Europe (Poland, UK, Spain), Asia (India). Main competences developed within the NCoE are as follows: Cyber, Data science, Blockchain, AI/Automation.

EY Polska does not lag behind with their initiatives to assist neurodiverse individuals. The company has created a Neurodiversity Center of Excellence in Poland in response to the challenges of the transition era and in accordance with the mission of the company mentioned above. Thus, EY Polska can boast the pro-neurodiversity approach and proposes quite a few solutions. In view of the potential of neurodiverse people on the one hand, and the company's capacity and readiness to enter a new area on the other hand, the company decided to take on this task in the local market and launch a pilot programme for the professional activation of neurodiverse people. They look first and foremost at talent, at the abilities that neurodiverse people may have above average in terms of analysis, precision or creative problem-solving, particularly skills such as pattern recognition and mathematical ability. The company is aware that by providing neurodiverse people with the right working and development conditions, they give them the chance to get their dream job. The IT industry is definitely one where people on the autism spectrum can use their strengths. The company launched an unusual project with the aim to employ 5 neurodiverse people in the company's Poland's Cyber security team, which was possible due to several factors such as demand for talent with above-average abilities, openness to innovation and thinking out of the box, recognising the potential of neurodiverse people who, because of their abilities, bring a new perspective to the team and who, on the other hand, can excel in the world of numbers and data. The implementation of the project was also possible thanks to the support from clients who have already had projects to employ neurodiverse individuals and appreciate the potential of this group of people. A multidisciplinary project team was working together with the AsperIT Foundation, which has experience in activating neurodiverse individuals. What is more, the key issues were the awareness of the need for changes in recruit-

ment, onboarding and retention in the workplace and the preparation of the organisation itself and the Cyber security team the part of which the candidates have become.

Following the success of the first edition, the company has launched the second edition of their neurodiversity career activation programme, which has included new areas such as Audit and the Risk Management area. They admitted having plans to recruit, train and deploy further neurodiverse talent by April 2024.

The data for Microsoft was derived mostly from the Internet, precisely from the company's website devoted to inclusive hiring: https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/diversity/inside-microsoft/cross-disability/hiring and a website https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/diversity/default specially dedicated to Global Diversity and Inclusion. Basically, the company boasts about its accessibility, empowering employees and inclusive hiring for people with disabilities. A newly released report from Microsoft reveals that the number of US employees who identify as having a disability is 8.8%. However, the focus of this study is to observe neurodiversity management practices in particular and Microsoft appears to lead the way in the area as well. The company organises recruitment, onboarding and development of neurodiverse individuals within a specially dedicated Neurodiversity Program. There are 4 exemplary stories on the website portraying neurodiverse individuals (ADHD, autism spectrum) successfully employed by Microsoft within the ND Program. The company also explains how the Program works and what their motivation for this kind of employment is: 1/ '*we built the Microsoft Neurodiversity Hiring Program on the belief that neurodivergent individuals strengthen a workforce with innovative thinking and creative solutions. Diverse teams positively impact our company culture, working environment and how we serve our customers*' 2/ '*the Neurodiversity Hiring Program seeks to attract talented neurodivergent candidates and provide the training and support needed for career growth and success*' 3/ '*through this program, applicants engage in an extended interview process that focuses on workability, interview preparation, and skill assessment. Our process gives candidates the opportunity to showcase their unique talents while learning about Microsoft as an employer of choice*'. The Program was created due to the company's belief that diversity enriches their performance and products, the communities where they live and work, and the lives of their employees. This program is part of the recruiting and career development strategy related to diversity and inclusion.

This represents one of the ways the company is evolving their approach to increase the diversity of Microsoft's workforce as they believe there is untapped potential in the marketplace and roles that would set future employees up for success.

Technically, the whole recruitment process for ND individuals is properly and meticulously organized on the website and all the necessary information is provided for ND individuals on how to recruit. Firstly, available positions through the Neurodiversity Program are listed in the proper sections of the website. Secondly, all the detailed instructions are given as for how to apply. Thirdly, the company holds a multi-day hiring event offering hiring in roles such as: Consulting, Content Writer, Customer Engineer, Data Analytics Manager, Data Scientist, Finance Analyst, IT Service Operations, Product Mktg, Program Manager, Service Engineer, Software Engineer, Support Engineer. There are also roles available identified as Internship Opportunities and announced at specific hiring events focused on university talent. The key issue here is that it is said directly on the website that the whole application/recruitment/employment process is dedicated to neurodiverse talent.

The interview process is also specially designed for ND individuals within the Program and it is constructed in the following way: 1/ the recruiting team reviews the candidate's skills and qualifications to see how they match up to the requirements of open roles 2/ if the candidate meets the requirements, they are asked to complete an online technical assessment or they are scheduled for a phone screen 3/ based on the assessment, the candidate may be invited to a hiring event 4/ at the hiring event the candidate will spend a few days learning what it's like to work at Microsoft while working on skill development and interview preparation. They will also meet with the interviewing team in both formal and informal settings, employees hired through the program, and members of the neurodiversity community at Microsoft 5/ based on skills assessments and interviewer feedback, the candidate could be offered a full-time job as a Microsoft employee. What is worth mentioning here is the lack of a standard job interview which usually creates a barrier for ND individuals who often have problems with maintaining eye contact or stress/emotion control. In the course of the recruitment procedure developed by Microsoft ND individuals have a chance to demonstrate their skills and talents during the hiring event where actions speak louder than words.

4. Discussion

This article aimed to identify good practices in the field of neurodiversity in multinational organisations. The multinationals examined as cases in this research paper have come up with systemic recruitment solutions in the form of Neurodiverse Centers of Excellence and Neurodiversity Program. Within the formula of the proposed solutions ND individuals are endowed with opportunities to find decent employment. This process is implemented within a non-standard recruitment approach

consisting of openness, tolerance and understanding demonstrated in the form of transparent job application rules listed on the company's website, a-few-days-lasting hiring events, support groups organised internally and readiness for cooperation with non-for-profit organisations such as AsperIt in Poland dedicated to supporting neurodivergent individuals.

Theoretically, the identification of good practices in neurodiversity management can serve as the basis for the construction of a feasible ND management model including the necessary suggestions, procedures and scientifically developed support whereby interdisciplinarity should be taken into account as the domains of sociology or psychology might be of great help as well. Practically, such a model could assist HR practitioners in adopting a neurodiverse workforce-friendly recruitment and onboarding approach, for instance with the traditional job interviews being disregarded in favour of longer lasting hiring events during which ND candidates would be given a chance to present their unique skills otherwise unnoticed.

Apparently, neurodiversity management is a chance but also a challenge for companies thus being in need of proper assistance. However, we already know how to provide this assistance. First of all, companies should be trained in how to adapt the recruitment process, workplace organisation and management practices to the needs of neurodivergent individuals. Since quite a large number of companies lack expertise in neurodiversity, they could build relations with experts such as government and non-for-profit organisations committed to supporting neurodivergent individuals [Szulc, 2021]. Moreover, they could work with medical and psychology professionals to develop cross-organisational awareness training fostering understanding of neurodiversity among organisational members [Szulc, 2021]. Such activities are found to promote relationship building and increase support for neurodivergent employees [Johnson et al., 2020] and to remove the stigma associated with their employment [Hidegh and Csillag, 2013]. Additionally, invaluable support could be provided in the form of systems-level solutions such as governmental financial incentives for companies to encourage them to employ neurodivergent individuals [Wiater, 2023].

Moreover, leaders with transformational qualities are highly needed [Hayward et al., 2019]. Microsoft employee diagnosed with ADHD, Cecilia Fang, gives an example of such a transformational leader's reaction after she informed him about her diagnosis: '*My manager's response was the best. He simply said, 'Thank you for telling me, Cecilia, I don't know anything about this disorder, but I'd love to learn*' [website https://news.microsoft.com/en-au/features/cecilia-fang/].

The main limitation of the study is the nature of case studies themselves as they have historically been stereotyped as a weak sibling among social science methods

[Yin, 1984]. A major reason why case studies are viewed in a negative light is due to the fact that many scientists equate 'precision, objectivity and rigor' with quantitative measures [Patton and Applebaum, 2003, p. 60]. Gummesson [1991] notes that qualitative measures are often classified as second rate by universities and business schools. Given that qualitative methods of data collection normally predominate in case studies, it logically follows that they are held in somewhat lower esteem [Patton and Applebaum, 2003, p. 60]. On the other hand, only qualitative methods are sensitive enough to allow the detailed analysis of change, while quantitative methods are only able to 'assess that a change has occurred over time but cannot say how (what processes were involved) or why (in terms of circumstances and stakeholders) [Cassell and Symon, 1994, p. 5]. Moreover, qualitative data can always be supplemented with quantitative data collected with the use of other relevant methods.

Conclusion

Although the topic of neurodiversity management is relatively new with the word 'neurodiversity' itself having its origins only in the 90s of the 20th century, there are already companies in the international labour market which appear to be experienced in dealing with the issue. Fortunately, some of them, like the organisations analysed in this study, belong to the group of huge multinationals, which is promising for the future as these are the most influential organisations setting the trends in styles and directions of employment.

The suggested direction for further research might be to move on to studying the functioning of the cases presented in this paper and relating them to other cases, for instance the cases of other organisations experienced in neurodiversity management, such as IBM, SAP or Skanska. The determination of the relationships between the cases as well as the systematization of knowledge and collection of good practices in the field of neurodiversity management might in turn lead to the creation of neurodiversity management model including all the necessary suggestions and procedures which could be adopted by organizations to implement the formula for ND individuals' employment.

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Zarządzanie neuroróżnorodnością w firmach międzynarodowych – studium przypadku

Streszczenie

Tematyka zarządzania neuroróżnorodnością to stosunkowo nowy obszar badań w naukach o zarządzaniu i jakości. Samo pojęcie 'neuroróżnorodność' stworzone zostało zaledwie

w 1998 roku. Od tego czasu coraz więcej mówi się o przewadze konkurencyjnej firm zatrudniających osoby neuroróżnorodne. Firmy, które potrafią wykorzystać potencjał tkwiący w neuroróżnorodności budują silne, innowacyjne zespoły zdolne zmieniać świat na lepsze. Zarządzanie neuroróżnorodnym zespołem wymaga zrozumienia, akceptacji oraz działań mających na celu stworzenie inkluzywnego środowiska pracy. Niemniej jednak jest to inwestycja w przyszłość, która przynosi wymierne korzyści zarówno firmom, jak i pracownikom. Pomimo korzyści płynących z zatrudniania osób neuroróżnorodnych większość z tych osób nadal jest odrzucana przez rynek pracy. Głównym celem niniejszego artykułu jest identyfikacja dobrych praktyk w zakresie zarządzania neuroróżnorodnością w organizacjach międzynarodowych wdrażających programy zarządzania neuróżnorodnością. Do zbadania w ramach analizy stadium przypadku wybrano dwie sztandarowe firmy: EY oraz Microsoft, które na swoich stronach internetowych wręcz chwalą się dobrymi praktykami i umiejętnościami w zakresie dobrych praktyk w obszarze zarządzania neuroróżnorodnością. EY należy do sektora consultingowego, Microsoft natomiast – do sektora IT, przy czym obydwie firmy prężnie działają również w Polsce.

Przeprowadzona analiza pozwoliła na zidentyfikowanie dobrych praktyk zarządzania neuroróżnorodnością w firmach międzynarodowych, takich jak dedykowany proces rekrutacyjny w formie eventu rekrutacyjnego, tworzenie wewnętrznych grup wsparcia dla neuroróżnorodnych pracowników oraz budowanie kultury organizacyjnej opartej na akceptacji, tolerancji i zrozumieniu. W związku z wynikami badania przedstawiono sugestie dla firm, aby ułatwić włączenie neuroróżnorodności w celu stworzenia środowiska pracy, w którym zarówno osoby neuroróżnorodne, jak i osoby neurotypowe mogą się rozwijać, przyczyniając się w ten sposób do sukcesu organizacyjnego.

Słowa kluczowe

neuroróżnorodność, zarządzanie neuroróżnorodnością, analiza studium przypadku, dobre praktyki