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Introduction

Every person is unique. Every brain is unique. Our interests, preferences, and behaviors vary. In children, it is evident that one child may be very active while another sits quietly and draws. One may enjoy playing hockey, while another prefers tennis. One grabs the stage, the other a book. Generally, we embrace these differences in children and marvel at how each child is distinct and develops in their own way. However, in a work environment with adults, these differences and individual preferences become more complicated. One employee thrives in a lively open-plan office, while another prefers a quiet workspace. One enjoys working in a team, while another prefers to work alone. One is good at creating structure, while another adds a creative touch to the team. We call this enormous diversity in the way people think, communicate, and process stimuli neurodiversity, a diversity of brains.

This diversity holds tremendous potential; studies indicate that neurodiverse teams can be up to 30 percent more productive than homogeneous teams¹. However, the reality is that our society often does not accommodate the different ways people function. In organizations, we frequently adhere to norms that not everyone can meet. While we may all struggle with certain working, learning, and communication methods at times, a significant proportion of the population deviates enough from the norm to experience genuine challenges. These individuals are referred to as neurodivergent, possessing brains that differ from the typical brain. People with a typical brain are called neurotypical. At least 20 percent of the

global population is neurodivergent². This is often perceived as a handicap or disorder that needs fixing, and many individuals are given medical labels such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, bipolar disorder, or otherwise labeled as highly sensitive or gifted. Many neurodivergent individuals find the standard way of working or managing so restrictive that it leads to frustration, conflicts, and even absenteeism or dismissal.

For instance, I worked with a colleague with an ADHD brain for a long time. He had a lot of energy and came up with new ideas almost daily, but due to poor time management, he frequently arrived late to appointments. In meetings, he irritated colleagues by interrupting them or frequently changing topics. The company benefited greatly from the innovative concepts he generated, but ultimately, he was criticized in performance reviews for being tardy and not keeping to team agreements. He left the company frustrated.

Another example is an autistic colleague who became overwhelmed in a busy open-plan office and preferred working in the same quiet spot every time. She skipped company outings and Friday afternoon socials because they were too burdensome for her. In team meetings, she was always pointing out inconsistencies and deviations from agreements. She was often told to “make a bigger effort to participate in the group process,” with no acknowledgment of her meticulous work that was always completed on time. She forced herself to conform to social norms and, burned out, eventually left.

Or consider the new highly gifted colleague who immediately noticed inefficiencies in processes in her department. She took it upon herself to improve them alongside her regular tasks, but according to her supervisor, that was not her job. It regularly led to conflicts, causing her daily frustration and draining her energy. Despite enjoying the work, she moved to another team.

Throughout my 25-year HR career and interviews with neurodivergent individuals for this book, I’ve heard numerous stories of people

eager to make a positive contribution but whose exceptional talents went unrecognized by the organization. People with differently wired brains often possess indispensable qualities that can bring significant benefits to the workplace. We all have strengths and weaknesses, but in neurodivergent individuals, the differences are more pronounced, which leads to challenges.

Talents of neurodivergent individuals

Neurodivergent individuals can possess a range of valuable qualities. They may display extraordinary attention to detail, vision, strong spatial-visual abilities, hyperfocus, high energy, intrapreneurship, a high degree of creativity, the ability to make unexpected connections, and data-driven thinking. They are often autonomous and unconventional thinkers who bring essential 21st-century skills to the table, such as critical thinking, problem-solving, perseverance, innovative thinking, and creativity. These skills are currently in high demand, as employers are desperate for them.

The volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) times we live in demand diverse brains. Especially a society like this needs a high level of collective intelligence, which requires a broad diversity of brains. Neurodivergent brains excel at handling complexity, irregularities, and connections. However, people who think differently are indeed different. It's also essential to realize that collaboration has increased by 50 percent in the past twenty years³, both in working groups at school and in workplace collaborations. This heightened collaboration makes 'being different' more noticeable, causing neurodivergent individuals to feel increasingly out of place in organizations. From my own research, I see that employees who identify as neurodivergent score lower on feelings of 'belonging' and 'being themselves' than neurotypical individuals. However, this doesn't have to be constricting. In the right context and with

the right support, less conventional brains can be the problem solvers, innovators, and inventors that organizations need. It's no coincidence that major discoveries, disruptive breakthroughs, and timeless artistic expressions were created by individuals we now classify as neurodivergent. Consider figures like Mozart, Da Vinci, Steve Jobs, Churchill, Einstein, Michelangelo, Elon Musk, Marie Curie, John Lennon, Picasso, Eleanor Roosevelt, and Emily Dickinson. While not every neurodivergent person is a prodigy, seeing possibilities instead of limitations creates space for tremendous potential.

In the masterclasses and workshops on neurodiversity that I conduct, many managers ask me "But can't these people just adapt?" Yes, they can, and often very well. Many neurodivergent individuals are not fully aware of their strengths and have adapted over the years. Masking is a natural response to fit into a group, but it undermines the identity and conceals potential. Eventually, it takes a toll on individuals and can lead to burnout. Over 70 percent⁴ of neurodivergent individuals hide their neurotype, fearing a negative impact on their careers. This book aims to support them in their invisible struggle to belong and make a meaningful contribution, to be recognized for what they can do and who they are.

I am wired differently too

With my experience in HR, sustainable employability, and learning & development, my interest in neurodiversity grew. I observed how people could excel when placed in the right position and struggle when placed in the wrong one. It takes one to know one: also my creative brain requires the right context to flourish. I have always felt different and struggled with certain social situations at work and in private life. I saw things (solutions, trends, connections) that were clear and made perfect sense to me but were often not apparent to others. I frequently thought, "Are they kidding me? It is so obvious!"

Through trial and error, I learned what works for me and how I can excel. Insights like these could have helped me immensely earlier in my career and spared me many struggles. I would have appreciated having role models in the organization who portrayed everyone's possibilities. Unfortunately, you often only discover your Brain manual when you reach your limits or push beyond them.

I've had managers who understood me and, unfortunately, those who didn't. I understand how persistent the qualification of being 'strange' or worse, someone with a disability, can be. Fortunately, I have also worked in places where I was seen for who I was. I even worked in an organization where they did not have a job profile for me because "you are the professional here, we're not going to dictate what you should do." Yes, that is possible too, and much more is possible when you open your mind to what is different.

A manager can make a significant difference by recognizing potential and encouraging self-awareness in employees. However, managers often struggle with employees who don't fit into standard job profiles or working methods. They find them challenging because they do things differently from the rest and don't conform to what is customary. Yet, these are the people who bring creativity, problem-solving abilities, and inspiration with their clear vision. It is therefore crucial for managers to understand neurodiversity. In what ways do colleagues differ so fundamentally that organizational standards don't work? In what context do neurodivergent individuals thrive? It varies for each person. Sometimes, all it takes is a sympathetic ear, aligning with what someone is good at, and accepting what someone with such a brain might not excel at. However, often more is needed, in the physical environment, the culture, communication, collaboration, and management within an organization. That's why this book is also for managers, to better understand what they can do to create the right context.

We need a different perspective

The behavior of neurodivergent individuals deviates (is divergent) from what we consider normal (typical) behavior. However, ‘normal behavior’ is a subjective concept, heavily influenced by factors such as culture, societal norms, age, the majority or the dominant group. So, ‘being different’ is essentially an opinion, albeit one with significant consequences. It’s time for a paradigm shift in which we abandon the current notion that ‘different from usual’ equates to ‘having a disorder.’ This doesn’t negate the fact that neurodivergent individuals, like anyone else, can benefit from psychological assistance when needed, and diagnoses can contribute to self-awareness and self-care.

It’s time to look at variations in brains as natural and complementary. We need to shift from a medical mindset – thinking in terms of disorders – to a social mindset – realizing that we genuinely need neurodivergent brains with cognitive specializations in our society. These brains have survived evolution for a reason; apparently, humanity benefits from them. Different times and situations require different brains, often referred to as ‘complementary cognition’. If we all had the same brain, we would have become extinct long ago. It might not be a coincidence that an estimated 5-25 percent of the bee population has a different – exploratory – role⁵. Is this a ratio organized for us by nature?

Structure of this book

For this book, I spoke with more than a hundred employees with unique brains, and also scientists and managers. I aimed to strip their stories down to their essence. It was sometimes challenging to pinpoint where their workplace challenges lay and subsequently determine the right context for each brain in organizations. Conversa-

tions with neurodivergent individuals who navigated organizations smoothly thanks to their openness and resourcefulness were also enlightening. In this book, you will hear directly from neurodivergent individuals, often anonymously. Fortunately, there are many who can be open about their brains.

I will take you through the beautiful diversity of brains and share the lessons I learned from candid conversations. Additionally, I will provide tips and offer a model for managers and employees to create the right context for each brain. Drawing from an HR perspective, I will guide you to look at all HR processes through a neuro-inclusive lens. I'll describe the most common labels – or what I prefer to call neurotypes – in the context of the workplace and in terms of their value for innovation and collaboration. Throughout the book, you'll read stories and quotes from fascinating brains eager to contribute to a neuro-inclusive society. As someone beautifully put it, a neuro-equal society.

This book is divided into three parts. In the first part, I will delve into what neurodiversity is, what organizations can gain from it, and where the challenges lie. In the second part, I'll discuss concrete ways all involved parties can ensure that neurodivergence becomes a strength within every organization. We will explore what the manager, team members, the organization as a whole, and society can do. Neurodivergent individuals themselves can also contribute. Finally, in the third part, I will delve into the various neurodivergent brains.

Throughout the book, I will present various exercises to initiate discussions about everyone's brain needs. After part one, for example, you'll find a 'brain user manual' you can fill out containing questions about your brain's needs. In part two, I provide exercises to help you and your team or organization get to know each other's brains. Ultimately, openness about everyone's brain and space for everyone's needs are the keys to a brain-friendly workplace.

When all minds thrive

Through research, we now know that attention to neurodiversity has a positive effect⁶ on the well-being of every employee. This book is ultimately for all individuals in organizations because we all thrive in a more personalized approach where everyone can be themselves. Let's explore each other's brains so that we know what we're good at, so we can utilize each employee's talent rather than let them burn out on what drains them disproportionately. This knowledge can be invaluable for a high-performance organization. Who do you put forward in a crisis? Who do you turn to when irregularities need to be removed from documents? Who can come up with a good solution for a highly complex problem, and who contributes to vision formation on a particular subject? Organizations that can bring together the right brains are sitting on a goldmine.

Part 1

The power of neurodiversity

“No balance without counterbalance, and no dialogue without dissent.”

– Herman Tjeenk Willink, politician and Minister of State