



What happens when great minds don't think alike?

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Meet the challenges of a rapidly increasing, complex world where thinking and teaming are rapidly accelerating.

I imagine a world in which the combination of converging technologies, and the power of truly diverse, multidisciplinary teams, is harnessed to transform business, academia and governments. Imagine transformation and purpose intersecting to build the curiosity, agility and resiliency needed to thrive in this new world. What you have created is a unique moment in time for organizations to differentiate and activate the exponential power of neurodiversity by creating inclusive, high-performance teams. The opportunity to access, integrate and energize your organization and its stakeholders is here!

We're living in an era of increasing change and ambiguity. While we don't know what the post-pandemic world will look like, the sheer force of disruption from the COVID-19 crisis has been dramatic, from rapid digital transformation to exposing underlying structural inequities. However, one thing is certain; organizations will need to continue to focus on the value and importance of transformation if they want to thrive in the present and be agile in the future state. Key to this is the core idea of value creation based around a triad of humans at center, technology at speed and innovation at scale. By undertaking the journey of incorporating and curating cognitive differences into their teaming models, organizations are positioning themselves to solve transformation challenges directly. The ability to simultaneously imagine and realize new solutions with emerging technology and the power of data will determine organizational value and longevity.

As the pandemic continues to disrupt the way we live, work and connect with each other, the old command-and-control hierarchy with rigid team structures and functional silos gives way to more agile, team-focused ecosystems that operate as a distributed network. These ecosystems are redefining the importance of multidisciplinary teams that are adept at transformative thinking. Single or sporadic adaptations will not be enough to deliver this future. Diverse, multidisciplinary teams must be prepared to continuously flex, coming together to embrace the digital and emerging technology angles of transformation and leveraging the talents of *all* employees, to meet new challenges. As we've seen companies pivot to manufacture personal protective equipment or adopt new business models in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, business leaders also have an opportunity to use this moment to recast talent models to be more agile and resilient.

Organizations whose workforces include the full dimension of diverse perspectives and talented people with technical skills gain competitive advantage. Leaders must examine how they harness the power of their people and quickly upskill them as new talent needs emerge. Neurodiversity is a crucial part of rethinking the "who and how" of agility as business leaders rise to meet a rapidly changing market and society.

Embracing diversity of thought

Leaders must seek new ways of approaching their business to not only better serve their customers, but also stay ahead of the competition.

Research shows that diverse perspectives drive better business outcomes, and that when people feel a sense of belonging at work, they are more creative, healthier and more engaged. However, diverse perspectives alone are not enough — rather, it is the application and integration of diversity that truly unlock value. This is especially true with neurodivergent individuals who help organizations meet the demand for innovation. As a result, these organizations

are better positioned to excel in areas key to future success and with strong organizational muscle for transformation, especially when it comes to:

- Analytical thinking and innovation
- Reason, complex problem-solving and ideation
- Technology design and programming
- Creativity, originality and initiative

Research shows that approximately 15% to 20% of the world's population is neurodivergent (e.g., those with autism, Asperger's, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dysgraphia, dyscalculia). This rich, untapped talent pool in each of our communities is impacted by an unemployment/underemployment rate around 85%. Interestingly, as the world and business problems have become increasingly ambiguous and complex, neurodivergent individuals have struggled to fit into traditional profiles sought by employers, which are becoming less relevant every day.¹ The lack of employment is not only harmful to the well-being of the neurodivergent community, but also results in a major lack of knowledge for organizations, particularly around areas such as technology and data science where there is a tremendous need for skilled workers in artificial intelligence, cybersecurity and advanced analytics.

The combination of neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals builds an integrated, multidisciplinary, transformational team with diverse perspectives and agility required to diagnose and solve complex challenges, as well as imagine and realize future-focused solutions. Companies have found that a deliberate orchestration to incorporate neurodiversity brings performance improvements: productivity gains, quality improvement, boosts in innovation and ingenuity, and across-the-board improvements in employee engagement.² This is exponential value that can only be generated by exponential exceptional teams.

Neurodivergent and neurotypical professionals create transformational teams

Teams with members who think differently will bring different approaches and perspectives, and leverage the power of converging technologies necessary for organizations to reach the full potential of value for their stakeholders. Truly diverse teams incorporate a neurodivergent perspective, which has traditionally been missing. This talent and teaming innovation model provides the power of cognitive differences required for companies to better engage with stakeholders, such as government and academia, while galvanizing their employees to improve internal processes and infrastructure, and strengthen the culture of innovation. These contributions enhance workforce ability and accelerate technology processes and solutions — such as intelligent automation, blockchain, cybersecurity, cloud optimization, true data science and analytics.

Imagine an organization that is able to transform society in a way that would simultaneously impact individuals and families, employees and leaders, vendors and partners, and academia and government. This is a unique time for organizations to differentiate, significantly increasing value across five dimensions:

1. Collaborate with problem solvers to co-create breakthrough innovations and experiences.

2. Be part of a thriving community that includes academia, pioneering companies and government to collaborate and scale the workforce innovations that our future economy requires.

3. Apply neurodiverse thinking to critical business challenges and accelerate experimentation and rapid prototyping of new ideas.

4. Participate in new ways of working by embracing societal realities of constant change and other potential business disruption (e.g., future pandemics, terrorist attacks); build agility, resiliency and future-focused leadership muscle.

5. Being different is a valued core attribute of company brand and purpose.

Closing the gap between divergent thinking styles requires a cultural shift throughout an organization. Instead of focusing on the perceived deficits of neurodivergent individuals — such as difficulty making eye contact, sensory or social challenges and how they fit into the traditional/outdated models of teaming — organizations need to think about how they can widen their perspectives to embrace diversity of thought. By bridging that gap, leaders are well-prepared for the future and better able to meet the next challenge through deliberate neurodiverse teaming.

Neurodiversity-powered transformation – how business leaders can build the organization’s agility and resiliency

A workforce with diversity of thought means many voices and ideas. And this multitude of perspectives includes fewer echo chambers and more innovative ideas from people who brainstorm, problem-solve, evaluate and strategize in a variety of ways. In short, it’s building a transformation mindset. The table below showcases how neurodiversity can help organizations realize this transformation.

Typical failure points	Transformation realized
Lack a transformation story Fail to create a compelling reason for people to go above and beyond	Create a compelling story framed in the future Inspire, inform and convince the organization that we are on the right path
Allow the organization to lose belief Fail to sustain motivation, inspiration and energy over time	Stimulate belief by revisiting assumptions regularly Test the assumptions and vision to adjust direction and maintain momentum
Work toward a set of static capabilities Fail to invest in the ability to navigate “high rate of change” environments	Work toward a dynamic state Recognize that the purpose of transformation is to become transformative
Rely on functional experts who’ve done it before Fail to innovate and test your assumptions from every angle	Embrace diversity to challenge the status quo Embed cross-functional, multidisciplinary and neurodiverse perspectives
Focus on activities over outcomes Fail deliver the right outcome because of a process or timeline	Balance agility and flexibility to drive outcomes Use agile methods to balance the plan with the organizational and operational reality

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So, how does a leader build agility and resiliency with neurodiversity in mind? By tapping into an organization's purpose and focusing on the long-term value of a business — the dimensions of human, consumer, societal and financial — leaders can hone in on the levers needed to drive change and prioritize the most strategic problems. In each phase listed below, the transformative potential grows. There are six steps on the journey:

1. **Build a foundation.** Establish new talent models and the ability to attract neurodivergent talent.
2. **Pilot.** Incubate and develop talent to deliberately incorporate neurodivergent resources to drive diverse perspectives.
3. **Integrate technology and innovation.** Source meaningful projects by appropriately matching skills with work.
4. **Socialize ROI and scale.** Access diverse thinking, cutting-edge technology and skills to solve complex problems. Actively promote and invite others (neurotypicals) to contribute to the success of truly diverse, multidisciplinary teams.
5. **Apply transformative thinking across the enterprise.** Accelerate new business models and rapid prototyping for solution exploration. Allow for experimentation and departure from traditional business process
6. **Create and influence the external ecosystem.** Empower transformational leadership, strengthen networks and positive societal branding across all stakeholders to build long-term value

Companies need to create an inclusive environment that embraces a wide range of thinking styles.

In this transformative age, the core of value creation is the triad of technology at speed, innovation at scale and humans at center. Companies that don't drive a deliberate sense of inclusion and belonging, including diversity of thought, will fall behind. Strategically matching future-focused data and technology needs to untapped neurodivergent talent produces significant business results, and this is not a philanthropic, CSR,³ or D&I or HR effort.

“Our goal is to broaden the way we think about talent, success and skills and backgrounds of individuals who can make a contribution to the EY mission,” says Kelly Grier, EY US Chair and Americas Managing Partner. “These neurodivergent colleagues have transformed our business in tremendous ways —working on breakthrough innovations, improving our processes and boosting our efficiency for our clients,” she also noted.

Companies that embrace a workforce that includes neurodivergent talent, and build truly neurodiverse teams, have an opportunity to recognize individuals for their unique contributions and also gain competitive edge by increasing efficiency, productivity and innovation, all while promoting authentic brand capital by creating a spectrum of value to stakeholders. These are the components that produce exponential benefits to thrive!

¹ "Untapped Talent: How To Attract Neurodiverse Candidates," Forbes (May 5, 2020).

² "Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage," Harvard Business Review (May-June 2017).

³ CSR means corporate social responsibility.

Summary

Organizations whose workforces include the full dimension of diverse perspectives and talented people with technical skills gain competitive advantage. Leaders must examine how they harness the power of their people and quickly upskill them as new talent needs emerge. Neurodiversity is a crucial part of rethinking the "who and how" of agility as business leaders rise to meet a rapidly changing market and society.

About this article

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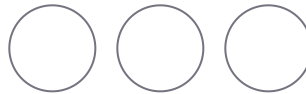
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