

Neurodiversity in the workplace; Disclosure experiences of neurodivergent university staff

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Aims/Objectives: What was the purpose what you did? Why is your topic important? What did you want to change? What difference did you want to make?

Neurodivergent identities such as Autism, ADHD, and Dyslexia are considered hidden disabilities, with the onus of deciding whether to disclose at work placed on the individual. While many neurodivergent individuals can mask (pretend to be neurotypical) at work, masking places additional cognitive and emotional burden on neurodivergent people and can lead to significant burnout and mental ill-health. Disclosing neurodiversity, however, can lead to discrimination and stereotyping. This research explores the reasons why working adults choose to disclose or not at work, as well as their lived positive and negative experiences of disclosure, and makes recommendations based on these experiences.

Methods/Process: Who was involved? What did you do? (100 words)

As part of the University of Melbourne Neurodiversity Project, staff at the university were invited to take part in an anonymous online survey looking at the needs and experiences of staff around neurodiversity. 262 self-identified neurodivergent and 162 neurotypical staff took part in this survey. The majority of neurodivergent staff identified as ADHD (168) and/or Autistic (101). This survey covered a wide range of topics, with this presentation focusing on open and closed-ended survey questions describing how many people disclosed, reasons why participants do or do not disclose neurodivergence, and participants positive and negative disclosure experiences.

Results: What did you find? What changed? What difference did you make? What did you learn?

Only 50% of participants had disclosed their neurodivergence to their direct manager. The most common reasons for disclosing were “to help others understand me better”, “so I don’t have to mask”, and “to self-advocate”. The most common reasons for not disclosing were “Worrying about judgement or stereotyping”, “Worrying about how it may affect job or promotion opportunities”, and “Uncertainty about who it is safe to disclose to”. Participants described a range of positive disclosure experiences, with themes around being accepted, not judged, and asked about accommodation needs. Negative disclosure experiences included not being believed, being stereotyped, and direct discrimination.

Conclusion: How could other people use what you found out? What would you recommend other people do based on what you did and what you found out?

Based on people's lived experience of disclosure, there are benefits to disclosure but also real risk, and navigating this can put additional burden on neurodivergent people. Judgement, stereotyping, and invalidation can cause real harm, but so can being forced to mask (pretend to be neurotypical) and work without accommodations, leading to a lose-lose situation for many neurodivergent people. We suggest both education about neurodiversity in the workplace to combat stereotypes and creating more inclusive and accommodating spaces by default (e.g. allowing flexible work options) may improve conditions for both those who choose to disclose and those who do not.

Alignment with the Conference Theme: How does your proposal address the conference theme of 'New Frontiers'? How does your proposal showcase something new we can do to make the world a better place for people with disability? (50 words)

This research utilised an entirely neurodivergent research team with community goodwill to help hear the voices and needs of neurodivergent people who are navigating work both with and without being open about this identity. We make recommendations about workplace inclusivity from these often-underrepresented perspectives.