

A Study Exploring the Psychological Perspective of Indian Managers on Employing Neurodiverse Talent.

¹Elixir Sagar, ²Dr. Shikha N. Khera, ³Dr. Naval Garg

¹Research Scholar, Delhi Technological University, Rohini, New Delhi

²Assistant Professor, Delhi Technological University, Rohini, New Delhi

³Assistant Professor, USME Delhi Technological University (East Campus), New Delhi

Received: 20- March -2023

Revised: 15- April -2023

Accepted: 21-May-2023

Abstract

Introduction: This study explores the psyche of Indian managers when faced with the prospect of hiring a neurodivergent employee in an Indian business organization. Ten Indian managers were interviewed and thematic analysis was used to extract different themes and subthemes from the collected data. Two main themes comprising of several subthemes emerged from the collected data. The first theme was 'neurodiversity awareness among Indian managers'. It includes two subthemes: a) little awareness and unfavourable attitude; b) Apprehension regarding competence of neurodiverse employees. The second theme highlights readiness of Indian managers to employ neurodiverse people in their organizations. Subthemes included are a) reasonable workplace accommodations; b) legal aspect of employing neurodiverse individuals; c) fear of ridicule; d) resistance from neurotypical employees.

Objectives: The principle objective of the study was to understand Indian managers perspectives on hiring neurodiverse employees and their apprehensions regarding the same.

Methods: Semi structured interview questionnaires were prepared based on comprehensive review of literature, consultation with neurodiverse individuals and social workers involved in aiding neurodiverse employees to get gainfully employed. Thereafter thematic analysis based on Braun and clarkes(2006) approach to qualitative thematic analysis was deployed to analyse the data.

Results: Two main themes comprising of several subthemes emerged from the collected data. The first theme was 'neurodiversity awareness among Indian managers'. It includes two subthemes: a) little awareness and unfavourable attitude; b) Apprehension regarding competence of neurodiverse employees. The second theme highlights readiness of Indian managers to employ neurodiverse people in their organizations. Subthemes included are a) reasonable workplace accommodations; b) legal aspect of employing neurodiverse individuals; c) fear of ridicule; d) resistance from neurotypical employees.

Conclusions: The results have implications for Indian organizations looking to employ neurodiverse talent. Indian managers and employees must be made aware of neurodiversity through organization wide initiative like seminars, lectures and so on, Team building and sensitivity training exercises must be performed to encourage empathy towards neurodiverse individuals. Future researches can look into providing workplace accommodations to neurodiverse employs, employing neurodiverse women in Indian organizations.

Keywords: Neurodiverse talent, managers, India, disability, Managerial psychology

1.Introduction

Neurodiversity is loosely defined as a naturally occurring variation in neurological wiring in human beings. Neurodivergent individuals lie at the edges of the bell curve as far as neurological functioning is concerned. The term neuroatypical is often used interchangeably with the term neurodivergent to describe individuals with people on the autism spectrum (ASD), those with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder and dyslexia. As opposed to this, neurotypical is a person of typical and normal cognitive, developmental and intellectual capabilities (Brusie, 2017). Since, neurodiverse people has different set of neurological wiring than neurotypical people, they have a different approach, style, and perception of a situation. They have a unique way of thinking and savant abilities with systems like computer programming, software testing and mathematics. Also, they are blessed with high levels of creative talents, indifference to peer pressure to conform to social norms that are not in tune with their own personal idea of happiness, musical abilities, above-average levels of attention to detail, strong visual-spatial skills, and remarkable abilities in art and design (Austin & Pisano, 2017). Yet despite having off the charts abilities in some aspects of their lives, these neurodiverse individuals often struggle to find

and sustain a job (Pesce, 2019) due to their socially ineptitude, their sensory overload issues and an inability to thrive in an unsuitable work environment that is designed keeping in mind neurotypical employees (Bellini, 2006).

The neurodiversity approach to the evolution of the human mind views neurological developments that have previously been considered as an anomaly or as a diagnosable disorder, such as autism or dyslexia (Jaarsma & Welin, 2012). People who stand by this perspective argue that many neurodiverse individuals are talented and are capable of functioning productively in an organization. But they are not able to get work opportunities that match their talents (Robison, 2013). The main issue is conventional hiring methods that have a very narrow definition of talent, and mostly rely on job interviews, which are biased against people with atypical manners of interaction (Baldwin and Costley, 2015; Eckerd, 2020). Hence diversity is not the problem. And real challenge lies with proper management of diversity in an organizational context (Härtel & Fujimoto, 2000). Despite the slow acceptance of this alternative inclusive view of diversity in countries like India, its validity is being established with major companies like Microsoft, JP Morgan and chase, Ford and DXC. These companies have started pro-neurodiverse employment initiatives like placing less emphasis on interviews in favor of inclusive recruiting practices that have lead to greater success in hiring neurodiverse individuals.

Researchers, practitioners, and neurodiverse activists have highlights a dearth of studies in the domain of the employment of neurodiverse individuals in modern workplaces in countries like India (Chaudary et al., 2008; Barua, 2007; Sharma et al., 2013). Although research exploring experiences of individuals who are in the minority group with respect to their race, gender, sexual orientation has only grown in the recent years, scant research exists to study the workplace experiences of Indian individuals who are minorities due to their variant neurology. Even less research exists to explore employer perspectives on employing neurodiverse employees at the workplace. Although in recent years a few big MNC's like SAP, Microsoft, Google, JP Morgan Chase, Hewlett Packard etc have started recruiting neurodiverse workers owing to their unique abilities in problem solving, software testing and other domains (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Moran, 2019). Yet, little research exists exploring the perspectives of Indian managers on employing neurodiverse individuals. Through this research, we study Indian managers' when faced with the prospect of employing neurodiverse talent.

In the recent times, researchers have started using the term autism spectrum condition to paint a holistic picture of heterogeneous autistic traits (Krzeminska, Austin, Bruyere, & Hedley, 2019; Haywards, Mcvillya, & Stokes, 2018). It suggests that autistics are "wired" differently in a way they process information differently rather than having an illness to be cured. They opined that the term disorder is correlated to disability which has a negative connotation (Lai & Baron-Cohen, 2015). The neurodiversity movement has shifted the focus from viewing autism as a pathological condition to one that doesn't need a cure. Proponents of neurodiversity movement feel that there is no right or wrong way to function in society. The "right" way is just a social construction and is in no way more correct than thinking there is a "right" gender. Thus the main issue with autism is not with autism but rather with the lack of awareness, acceptance and accommodations to how a neurodiverse individual functions, that causes unwarranted stress and rejection for neurodiverse individuals. As opposed to neurodiverse, a "neurotypical" person is one with a neurocognitive style considered as "normal." and hence accepted by society. Neurodiversity movement opines that there are various neurological profiles (like Autism, Dyslexia etc) as well as "normal" or "neurotypical." The "neurodiversity movement" is a social justice movement for and by autistic individuals. Through this movement, they aim to get the same level of inclusion and respect as neurotypicals. Additionally, understanding autism requires listening to the experiences of autistic individuals, rather than those of neurotypical "experts" who have not lived through the autistic experience.

One of the most notable studies on employing a neurodiverse workforce was conducted by Rebolz (2012). The findings of the study suggest that the academic success of an autistic individual was tied with the level of stability of their childhood home environment. It also reported that the autistic workers found it difficult to maintain interpersonal relationships. Autistic employees gauged their level of success in terms of intellectual challenges, achievements and recognition received due to the achievement (Rebolz, 2012). The study also found that autistic employees might be ill adapted to solve open ended problems because of lack of context and difficulties in generalizing, thus, increasing their chance of failure. This may make their manager wrongly believe that the autistic worker is less intellectually competent than his peers (Rebolz, 2012). Also, all individuals on the spectrum were found to have sensory issues such as heightened sensitivity to certain smells, bright lights, etc. It leads to physical and mental anguish among autistic people, which decreases their productivity. Most individuals on the spectrum may make constant social blunders in meetings and their social interactions with peers due to their overtly blunt and honest comments. They also express their inability to understand context and sub context. It may lead to a label of "difficult" by their peers.

They also fail to understand contextual cues in communication (Geurts et al., 2019). Most autistic individuals display varied levels of difficulty in understanding non-literal uses of language like sarcasm, irony, and metaphor (Austin & Pisano, 2017). While this in no way implies that an autistic individual cannot think in abstract; it merely implies that they take language literally, to mean exactly what has been said (Annabi, Sunderesan, & Zolyomi, 2017). Confusion regarding non-literal language leads to them committing a social faux pas. Autistic individuals have deficits understanding another person's thought process or cognitive empathy but not necessarily emotional empathy (Harmsen, 2019). It may lead autistic individuals to become emotionally overwhelmed by cognitive, emotional, behavioral, or sensory demands. This may make them "shut down", withdraw, or have an emotional outburst called a "meltdown." To a neurotypical, these outbursts may seem to happen "out of the blue" but it is not usually the case. They are preceded by extended periods of sensory overload (Eckerd, 2020). Autistic individuals experience extreme levels of distress even when asked to accommodate small changes in their daily routine and neurotypical expectation of accepting a different way to solve a problem.

Despite the above shortcomings, there are countless benefits to hiring neurodiverse talent. Rebolz (2012) suggested that autistic employees are far more loyal to their company and specific manager than people not on the spectrum. Additionally, it is observed that neurodiverse employees are blessed with inherent abilities to observe and analyze minute and complex information and data. Autistic employee may derive a workable solution through analyzing such information, which may seem insignificant or useless to neurotypical people. Rebolz (2012) also pointed out that they persevere on difficult assignments long after their peers have given up, due to their need to demonstrate their intellectual capability and their need to help people in their workplace teams. Also, they contribute more to a company's finances than people not on the autistic spectrum, because they typically do not spend time socializing (Rebolz, 2012).

Powers (2018) stresses upon the fact that attracting and supporting neurodiverse talent requires that companies overcome their unconscious bias. It requires work in three specific areas i.e., different hiring process, workplace accommodation for autistic employees, and anti-bullying policies. Firstly, modern firms are required to make necessary and vital changes in their recruitment and selection process. Normally used hiring processes could gauge into performance and potential of neurotypical people. They fail to judge special abilities and talent of autistic people. Experts suggest a pragmatic change from resumes and interviews to task-based hiring processes. Work sampling, vestibule training, and practical assignment are ideal way to gauge into their competency level (Delaney, 2019). For inference, at Cockroach labs, autistics candidates are given creative tasks like take home projects, presentations, case studies, etc, that allows the candidate to show what they are abilities and talent. Additionally, focus is on open source interviews, wherein, candidate is aware of the general outline of the interview process and certain "curveball" questions are used to differentiate candidates who think on their feet from the average one (Delaney, 2019).

The major issues of workplace accommodation emerges post recruitment of a neurodiverse worker. These impending challenges include maximization of the performance and potential of autistic employee. Another emerging issue arises with retention of neurodiverse employees. Researchers suggest specific autistic-friendly adjustments to accommodate their concerns (Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2018). They also reported that employers were ready to consider providing workplace accommodations to the workers as long as it was economical and could also improve the productivity levels of neurodiverse employees. Vogus and Taylor (2018) listed desirable changes to accommodate autistic workplace. A workplace climate must appreciate and promote diversity. It allows respect and mutual understanding of workers of different community, race, colour, caste, region, and religion. Although modern workplaces have started to appreciate physical and geographically differences, the variations-based on different neurological wiring are yet to be acknowledged. Another desirable workplace changes in favour of accommodation of neurodiverse employees is ensuring psychological safety climate (Vogus and Taylor, 2018). Such, a climate promotes psychological well-being and capital of the employees, which include hope, optimism, self-efficacy, and resilience. At Ultraneers, autistic workers are allowed a flexible schedule, remote work, doing away of personal meetings in lieu of slack (an instant messaging app), having a concrete agenda for each meeting, doing away with open plan offices, doing away with interviews, and providing a career alternative to promotion to the post of a manager (Doyle, 2019).

Although workplace accommodation, anti bullying/anti harassment policies are much needed to sustain autistic workers. It is far more important to put formal and informal structures in place at work that prevent bullying of neurodiverse individuals particularly for asking for workplace accommodations, their social ineptitude, their shyness and inability to deal with office politics (Mellifont, 2019). It is also observed that neurodiverse people hesitate in reporting workplace bullying incidences. They find no benefit to approach seniors to complaint

against bullies, as neurotypical senior fails to recognize the uncivil behaviour of neurotypical employees. They evaluate such behaviour as normal and part-and-parcel of workplace life. In some cases, neurodiverse workers experience victimization or harassment after reporting any unprofessional act of neurotypical colleague. The need of the hour is to educate and aware employees regarding the plight, conditions, and special requirements of neurodiverse employees. Legal guidelines are already in place in certain countries but they are underutilized in reality (Mellifont, 2019).

Above-discussed literature suggests a growing need to explore the intricacies of employment of autistic employee especially in country like India, wherein autism is still considered as a social stigma. Researchers and practitioners have advocated studies from different point of views, i.e., from autistics workers, managers, colleagues, and customers' perspectives. This paper investigates Indian managers' perspective on diverse issues related to employment of neurodiverse employees.

2.Objective

The main objective of the study was to understand Indian managers psyche when faced with the prospective of employing and managing neurodiverse talent. As a subset of this objective we aimed to identify the source of their apprehensions towards employing a neurodiverse worker and how they can become more receptive of employing neurodiverse talent.

3.Methods

Participants

A total of 10 Indian managers participated in the research. Recruitment took place in Delhi and Bombay. Relevant snippets of the interviews were included as quotations in the 'results' section. To preserve the identity of the study participants, each participant was given a pseudonym consisting of an alphabet and a number. Participants were addressed using this pseudonym throughout the study.

Interview protocol

Study participants took part in a semi structured interview lasting between forty five minutes to an hour. Interview questions centered on neurotypical employers awareness of neuroatypicality as a form of diversity, ease of employing neurodiverse talent, readiness of Indian managers to provide workplace accommodations to neurodiverse employees.

Data analysis

The data from semi structured interviews has been analyzed thematically based on the work of Braun and Clarke (2006). An inductive approach has been adopted to analyze data. Data has been experientially oriented and the theoretical perspective adopted has been a critical realist one (Braun & Clarke, 2012), to systematically examine Indian managers subjective accounts of their experiences with neurodiverse employees. Direct quotes from the participants were used in illustrating the themes that had been identified. Authors read and re-read the transcripts of interviews, which helped in observation of recurring themes in the data. A coding framework was developed and used to code the data. Finally, entire transcripts was read, observed and categorized in different themes and subthemes.

4.Results

Two main themes emerged from the data. 1) Neurodiversity awareness among Indian managers , dealt with Indian managers perception of and (lack of)awareness of Neurodivergence as a phenomenon in human beings. Subthemes included a)Indian managers attitude towards ASD and other neurodivergent conditions b)Indian managers perceptions regarding competence of neurodiverse employees 2) Readiness to employ autistic talent dealt with Indian managers willingness to employ neurodiverse talent. Subthemes included a) reasonable workplace accommodations b)Legal aspect of employing neurodiverse individuals c)Fear of ridicule d)Resistance from neurotypical employees.

Theme 1: Neurodiversity awareness among Indian managers

Majority of Indian managers interviewed reported having little to no awareness about the term neurodiverse, although when they were illuminated about its link with autism spectrum disorders, ADHD and dyslexia quite a few of them reported being aware of it. However, awareness of neurodiversity was still only limited to examples of neurodivergent individuals depicted in mainstream Indian cinema.

Subtheme 1: Little awareness and unfavourable attitude

“Oh you mean someone like Ishann Awasthi in Taare Zameen par... I do know a few people who have children like that. I imagine it would be quite tough to bring them up. I wouldn't wish such an experience on my worst enemy” P07

“India is no country for the disabled. Resources are few, population density is too much.” P02

Subtheme 2: Apprehension regarding competence of neurodiverse employees

The interviewers made the managers aware of the unique strengths and talents of neurodiverse individuals yet they still expressed disbelief at the competence of neurodiverse employees.

“Well you say they're great at software testing ...I'd still have my doubts about their abilities until I get to see it for myself” P01

P02 who was a manager in a software company revealed that he had met a few employee who fit the definition of ASD and while he acknowledged that they were skilled at their jobs, he expressed apprehensions about their ability to be team players and fit in with their neurotypical colleagues.

“Yeah I have a guy like that in my team...pretty brilliant chap ...spots bugs in codes that would go unnoticed by others, yet he is quite eccentric, not very sociable , always twiddling his thumbs or playing with his shirt buttons. Not very presentable too, definitely not a team player. I don't see him moving up the ladder anytime soon”P02

“My nephew is mentally disabled or autistic ...whatever you call it. While he is good at numbers and as much as I would like to help him and other kids like him, we simply don't have the requisite resources or awareness at this point to employ them with other “normal” employees.”P05

Theme 2: Apprehension regarding competence of neurodiverse employees

Subtheme 1: Reasonable workplace accommodations

This subtheme dealt with Indian manager's readiness to provide workplace accommodations to neurodiverse employees. The employers were ready to provide workplace accommodations to neurodiverse workers as long as it did not involve commitment of extra resources and did not disturb the existing status quo in the organization.

“Allowing him (neurodiverse employee) to work from home some days of the week is possible..can be done but we simply don't have the infrastructure to give him a separate corner office...besides this might infuriate other employees who might see this as preferential treatment” P01

Subtheme 2: Legal aspect of employing neurodiverse individuals

All managers interviewed stated being aware of the persons with disability act in India but only a few were aware of the intricacies of the act. They further expressed apprehensions in employing neurodiverse talent for fear of any legal repercussions.

“Well...as much as I would like to employ a person like that ...I fear not being able to provide him the environment in which he can thrive and then...what if he complains against me or the company...it could become a human rights issue and taint our image”P08

Subtheme 3: Fear of ridicule

Owing to the deep stigma associated with autism and other mental disorders in India , managers expressed concern over being the subject of ridicule for employing autistic talent.

“My friends would definitely laugh at me behind my back...they might say stuff like...couldn't you get anyone better to do the job”P10

“It might make our organization seem incompetent...we are answerable to our stakeholders...employing them seems good from CSR perspective ...but we have to meet our targets at the end of the day , we can’t risk facing embarrassment because of them” P08

Subtheme 4: Fear of resistance from neurotypical employees

Indian managers expressed apprehensions over neurodiverse individual’s ability to blend into the company culture and bond with their neurotypical peers.

“Well like I said...we can’t give preferential treatment to some employs...especially when they look “normal” on the surface. Other employees may not understand ...they would face problems fitting in with the team”P01

“He might get covertly bullied or boycotted by his colleagues ...we won’t be able to help him in such a situation” P06

5.Discussion

Data collected through interviews with ten Indian managers helped shed light on the neurodiversity awareness and the readiness to employ neurodiverse talent among Indian managers. Two main themes emerged. Theme 1 deals with neurodiversity awareness among Indian managers. It highlights an important issue of lack of awareness regarding condition, status, special requirement, workplace accommodation facilities, and bullying-related issues of autistic employees. Subthemes dealt with Indian managers unfavourable attitude towards neurodivergent individuals and Indian managers’ apprehension regarding competence of neurodiverse individuals. It was found that majority of Indian managers interviewed lacked the requisite awareness about autism and related mental disorders and also held a negative perception towards the competence level of neurodiverse individuals. The first theme and its associated subthemes highlight important issues of lack of awareness, unfavourable attitude, and managers’ apprehension towards competency of autistic employees. It reflects a need to acclimatize and customize the managers and employees towards different set of ‘wiring’ of the neurodiverse workers. The budding managers during their MBA or other management courses must be made aware of autistic employees and their special requirements.

Theme 2 deals with Indian managers’ apprehension towards employment of neurodiverse talent. Subthemes deals with Indian managers readiness to provide reasonable workplace accommodations to autistic individuals, legal aspects of employing neurodiverse individuals, fear of ridicule and fear of resistance form neurotypical colleagues, it was found that majority of Indian managers interviewed were open to providing low investment workplace accommodations like schedule flexibility and working from home which did not disturb the status quo of the organization and did not require extensive commitment of resources. Indian managers also expressed apprehensions about the legal aspect of employing neurodiverse individuals as they felt that any perceived misdemeanor towards neurodiverse employees on their part would open the organization up to public scrutiny.

This is the first in depth study to examine Indian manager’s attitude towards employing neurodiverse individuals in the context of Indian organizations. Due to the Covid -19 lockdown , the data collection for this study took place through online interviews conducted over Google meet, Zoom, E-mail and instant messaging yet, this helped us collect data from geographically diverse locations within India.

The results have implications for Indian organizations looking to employ neurodiverse talent. Indian managers and employees must be made aware of neurodiversity through organization wide initiative like seminars. Team building and sensitivity training exercises must be performed to encourage empathy towards neurodiverse individuals. Future researches can look into providing workplace accommodations to neurodiverse employs, employing neurodiverse women in Indian organizations.

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