

# Generation A

# **Emerald Studies in Workplace Neurodiversity**

Series Editors: Cristina M. Giannantonio and Amy E. Hurley-Hanson

This important series is designed to make a significant contribution to the development of research on neurodiversity in the workplace. Despite increasing recognition of neurodiversity as a competitive advantage (Austin & Pisano, 2017), little is known about the work experiences and career outcomes of neurodiverse individuals. Neurodiversity is reported to include autism spectrum disorder, dyspraxia, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyscalculia, Tourette's syndrome, and other neurological differences. This series will include books, monographs, edited volumes, and practitioner handbooks examining the key individual, organizational, and societal issues surrounding neurodiversity at work, the challenges involved in finding and maintaining employment for neurodiverse individuals, and the need to understand which best practices will lead to positive work, career, and life outcomes for neurodiverse individuals.

The series, *Emerald Studies in Workplace Neurodiversity*, will synthesize critical thinking around the strategic issues associated with hiring and integrating neurodiverse individuals into the workplace. Titles in the series will provide current research in this area. This series will capture contemporary research and practice from a diverse range of international scholars, practitioners, and educators. The series will help to build connections between research and neurodiversity in the workplace.

The series will also explore the role of organizations, educational institutions, advocacy groups, and the public sector in preparing neurodiverse individuals for employment. It will also explore best practices being utilized in the employment process and how these may be adapted to address future challenges. This is a series that is relevant for both academics and practitioners, as it aims to further the research agenda on the topic and influence the ability of organizations to successfully hire neurodiverse individuals. While little is known about the work experiences and career outcomes of these individuals, the individual, organizational, and societal issues associated with neurodiversity in the workplace underscore the importance of this topic.

More information about this series at: <https://books.emeraldinsight.com/page/series-detail/Emerald-Studies-in-Workplace-Neurodiversity/>

# **Generation A: Research on Autism in the Workplace**

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

I never did a day's work in my life, it was all fun.  
Thomas Edison

*This book is dedicated to Generation A.  
May they find work as fulfilling, fascinating, and fun as we have.*

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## Preface

While much research has historically focused on young children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), far less research has examined the issues young adults with ASD and other forms of neurodiversity face as they transition into the workplace. Austin and Pisano (2017), in their much-cited *Harvard Business Review* article, detail the numerous advantages that neurodiverse individuals bring to the workplace. The authors suggest that neurodiverse applicants represent an enormous pool of untapped talent that could increase companies' productivity. Researchers have identified some potential skill sets and common characteristics of neurodiverse individuals that may benefit organizations. These skills include visual acuity, more deliberative decision-making, increased attentional focus, logical thinking, affinity for technology, as well as professional and occupational interests in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) fields (Crespi, 2016). STEM fields are of particular interest, as there is a growing need for a skilled workforce in these areas (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). Neurodiverse individuals may be an ideal fit for this segment of the labor market. Forty percent of global corporations are having trouble recruiting the talent they need (Manpower Group, 2018). The demand for talent is expected to dramatically increase as businesses and the economy return to prepandemic levels as vaccination rates increase and infection rates decline (Coy, 2021).

Despite the skill sets of neurodiverse applicants, the unemployment and underemployment rates for neurodiverse individuals, as compared to the general population, remain staggeringly high (Baldwin, Costley, & Warren, 2014; Krieger, Kinebanian, Proding, & Heigl, 2012; Nord, Stancliffe, Nye-Legerman, & Hewitt, 2016; Richards, 2012; Roux et al., 2013; Scott, Falkmer, Girdler, & Falkmer, 2015; Shattuck et al., 2012). Unemployment statistics for adults with ASD reveal that 85% are unemployed and that 69% of them want to work (National Autistic Society, 2016). Research has shown that many individuals with ASD have never been members of the labor force (Cidav, Marcus, & Mandell, 2012).

Shattuck et al. (2012) found that 35% of young adults with autism have never held a job, been members of the labor force, nor attended educational programs after high school (Cidav et al., 2012; Shattuck et al., 2012). A study of 200 transition-age young adults with ASD found that 81% were unemployed (Gerhardt & Lanier, 2010). A small study of young adults with ASD and IQs above 50 found that only 11.76% were employed (Howlin, Goode, Hutton, & Rutter, 2004). Other studies have found that approximately half of young adults with

ASD have worked for pay after high school (Roux et al., 2013). The same study also found that the odds of ever having a paid job were higher for those who were older, from higher-income households, or who had better conversational or functional skills (Roux et al., 2013).

The statistics for young adults are particularly troubling, as it is estimated that a half-million individuals with ASD will reach adulthood in the current decade and will be poised to enter the workplace in unprecedented numbers. These numbers are staggering and suggest the need to examine the long-term employment, career, and life outcomes for this generational cohort. Hurley-Hanson, Giannantonio, and Griffiths (2020) introduced the term *Generation A* to refer to this generational cohort of young adults with ASD. According to Autism Speaks (2019), “Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and autism are both general terms for a group of complex disorders of brain development. These disorders are characterized, in varying degrees, by difficulties in social interaction, verbal and nonverbal communication, and repetitive behaviors.” The World Health Organization (2013) describes ASD as “neurodevelopmental impairments in communication and social interaction and unusual ways of perceiving and processing information” (p. 7). As such, individuals with ASD often have difficulty in understanding the thoughts, intentions, and emotions of others (Bruggink, Huisman, Vuijk, Kraaij, & Garnefski, 2016). Some individuals with ASD may have difficulty regulating their own emotions. These challenges may create transition and employment issues for young adults with ASD (Samson, Huber, & Gross, 2012), not only as they enter the workplace, but potentially throughout their lives as their careers unfold.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 1 in 54 (18.5%) children are on the autism spectrum, and the presence of ASD is 4.3 times more common in boys (29.7%, 1 in 34) than in girls (6.9%, 1 in 144) (CDC, 2020). Autism Speaks (2019) estimates that there are 3.5 million people with ASD in the United States. The number of people affected by ASD is estimated to be in the tens of millions worldwide. Although it is difficult to get exact numbers, it is estimated that 1% of the world’s population has autism (CDC, 2018; Grønborg, Schendel, & Parner, 2013; Malcolm-Smith, Hoogenhout, Ing, De Vries & Thomas, 2013.; Wallace et al. 2012).

Each year the United Nations hosts World Autism Awareness Day. The theme in 2015 was Employment (The Autism Advantage, 2015), which highlighted the potential for persons with autism to make significant contributions in the workplace, given their unique individual strengths. It noted the widespread discrimination in the workplace against people with autism and the limited vocational training and job opportunities available to them. The number of individuals with ASD both in the United States and throughout the world represents an untapped and often overlooked segment of the labor force for organizations seeking to fill job vacancies and meet current and projected skills gaps (Austin & Pisano, 2017).

It is within this context that chapters were selected to be included in this edited volume. Each chapter examines various factors that may play a role in generating a neurodiverse workforce for the benefit of both organizations and individuals with ASD. These chapters capture contemporary research and practice from a diverse



range of scholars, practitioners, and educators, with the goal of building connections between research and practice focused on issues of neurodiversity in the workplace. While all of the chapters in this volume focus on ASD, it should be noted that neurodiversity also includes dyspraxia, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyscalculia, Tourette's syndrome, and other neurological differences. It is hoped that future research on neurodiversity in the workplace focuses on these and other neurological differences to discover the best practices that will lead to positive work, career, and life outcomes for neurodiverse individuals.

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Few of us could have imagined the challenges, adjustments, and obstacles that the pandemic would bring. COVID-19 attempted to derail many of our authors by shutting down research sites, limiting the ability to conduct in-person interviews, restricting travel, closing campuses, striking them and their families with the virus, and losing loved ones to the disease. Unprecedented rain in parts of the United States and Australia left some of our authors with flooded homes and no running water or electricity for weeks, while fires in Southern California resulted in last-minute evacuations for others. We are grateful for their dedication to their research and their commitment to creating a more inclusive workplace for members of Generation A. We thank them for their patience with us, for the many revisions, and for putting our deadlines ahead of their own during a challenging year.

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