

Does Neurodiversity Matter?

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Is your organization “neurodiverse?” Do you care? Should you? I recently caught a podcast promoting “neurodiversity” and “neurodivergence” - terms with which I was not previously familiar. If you, like me, are new to the concepts, I commend you to the following vocabulary lesson: [Neurodivergent & Neurodiversity: Meanings & Examples \(exceptionalindividuals.com\)](https://exceptionalindividuals.com). Seems my ADHD affliction casts me unexpectedly among an often-marginalized minority group of “exceptional individuals.” Trust me, the dual entendre is not lost on me. I’ve not yet fully looked into the naming decision. However, I am confident the dual meaning of “exceptional” was purposefully adopted.

As a newly self-aware neurodivergent and one serving on our law firm’s DEI Steering Committee, I now find myself questioning the measures and manners of diversification we choose to promote (and how many more we consciously choose or unknowingly fail), both individually and collectively, to recognize. How narrowly or broadly should we be promoting diversification of our firm’s workforce? Much like the LGBT community itself has struggled and still struggles today to determine and agree upon who to welcome under the tent, to be true to its name, ought, perhaps, those promoting DEI initiatives take a moment to appreciate and address the reality that the pillars of the movement, focusing for the moment only on diversity and inclusion, might be more narrowly or broadly defined. How many cynics and skeptics pre-disposed to reject DEI initiatives as inappropriate race, sexual preference, and/or gender-based proxies might soften their opposition if the storyline were recast so as to avoid altogether a “we-they” lens and be contextualized instead by the guiding concept that a heterogeneous workforce benefits everyone? President John F. Kennedy self-deprecatingly credited his success to having surrounded himself with a diversity of opinions, believing that a cabinet of like-minded “yes-men” would be self-defeating (and mostly redundant). Leaving for another day a more thoughtful look at the inequities sought to be addressed by the “E” in our collective DEI efforts (and noting in this context as well, the separate quest of some to expand such initiatives and their overarching acronym to recognize a “B” for Belonging, where everyone is not only invited to have a seat at the table but also is made to feel welcome to do so), encouraging and promoting diversity and inclusion ought, fundamentally, be founded upon a conscious effort to achieve a sum greater than its parts by bringing together those of differing perspectives. As another exceptional individual shared with me on this point, it’s not a “zero-sum” situation where one group’s loss is another’s gain. Everyone benefits!

So, I ask again . . . is your organization neurodiverse? Should you care? Hopefully, we can all agree, at least, that knowing and appreciating what neurodivergence means is a good first step in answering the question. Understanding the potential value of incorporating neurodivergent individuals in professional work environments and, in turn, harnessing such potential virtually assures “group-think” avoidance. What naturally flows from this recognition is an appreciation that diversity, in general, is a favorable objective. Striving to achieve a more diverse and inclusive work environment is important because, just as a rising tide lifts all boats, diversity, by definition, brings a broader depth of experiences, perspectives, and ways of looking at problems, everyday situations, and, yes, even legal issues and arguments. Whether to consider and promote diversity -- neurodiversity or otherwise! -- is not simply an objective (or subjective!) question of doing the right or wrong thing. Nor, I

suggest, is promoting a DEI agenda necessarily a matter of identifying and overcoming biases or prejudices (although these certainly play an unfortunate and unacceptable role in environments developed absent DEI considerations). Rather, I believe caring about issues such as neurodiversity and diversity more generally leads to avoiding tendencies towards like-mindedness and “group-think,” and, speaking apolitically, I believe that President Kennedy had it right when he made a point of assuring that a diversity of opinions informed his ultimate decision-making.

Should you care if your organization is neurodiverse? Of course you should.