

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You are listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators, and decision-makers, people with solutions to today's workforce challenges. I'm joined by Nat Lyckowski, IBM's Global Neurodiversity Advancement Leader. Nat, thank you for joining us on the Work in Progress podcast.

Nat Lyckowski, IBM's Global Neurodiversity Advancement Leader:

Thank you so much, Ramona. And thank you to all the listeners dedicating some of your very valuable time listening in. Hopefully, you'll enjoy our conversation as much as I hope to.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I've spoken to you before. I know they're going to enjoy it. So the first thing I want to ask you is give me a definition of neurodiversity. So I want to set the stage. I want to be able to say to folks, "You fall into this category if you identify this way."

Nat Lyckowski, IBM's Global Neurodiversity Advancement Leader:

So neurodiversity is a concept to respect and accept neurological differences as a natural part of human variation. Just like eye color or our height it's part of who we are. And neurodivergent differences includes things like dyslexia, ADHD, autism, Tourette's, dyscalculia, and beyond.

So it's basically people who think differently based upon the way our brains are wired, whether we were born this way or acquired over time, either through injury or illness, but there are people who think differently, and it's as simple as that. Not a deficit, not something that is with or has like I don't have neurodivergence like I would have a broken leg, right. This is something I can't leave it at home. It comes with me. It's like saying I'm a woman. It's part of my identity.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

What you're just saying here, that's part of your three A's for IBM's neurodiversity program.

Nat Lyckowski, IBM's Global Neurodiversity Advancement Leader:

Yes.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

I will say awareness is the first one, which-

Nat Lyckowski, IBM's Global Neurodiversity Advancement Leader:

Correct.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

... you just explained. And tell me about the other two.

Nat Lyckowski, IBM's Global Neurodiversity Advancement Leader:

Sure. The other two are acceptance and advancement. So awareness is a great place to start. That's where you're learning about what things are and are not. But awareness can be passive, and if you stay

at that awareness phase, you run the risk of actually being discriminatory. You actually run the risk of being a well-intentioned ally that might be doing actually more harm than good. You can be aware that someone is autistic or dyslexic or whatever, but if you don't want them on your team or if you don't want to work with them, then okay, great. You've checked the box that you're aware, but you haven't stepped it up to that sense of acceptance.

Acceptance is where you're putting that knowledge to use to make sure that individual feels accepted. And the last stage is advancement, and that's where you are actively pursuing to help ensure that individual advances, whether it's a career path, whether it's a development opportunity, whether it's just ensuring that their voice is heard at a meeting or that their thoughts are being able to be expressed at a function, making things accessible. And all of that really folds into making things more friendly, more human-friendly, as far as universal design, right. When you make things more neurodivergent-friendly, you make them human-friendly. It's a really a win, win, win across the board.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You gave me a stat when we spoke before that one in 20 people you meet are neurodiverse. So I think that awareness part might be lacking in a lot of people. They may not understand that these can be unseen disabilities, but they are disability nonetheless or an ability how you want to describe it.

Nat Lyckowski, IBM's Global Neurodiversity Advancement Leader:

Absolutely. And I think a lot of that also goes to the stigma and the sometimes shame. And there's also a CQ factor here of cultural intelligence, right, talking about mental differences in Asia versus Europe versus Australia and everywhere. You bring that extra layer with you of where you're coming from. So that's a definite component too that has to be addressed in addition to everything else.

But yes, it is one in 20 and I think many of those individuals probably know they're a little different, and whether or not they come out about it is something, whether or not they don't have... they haven't grown into their courage yet or they are dealing with imposter syndrome, or they're dealing with feeling that they need to have themselves formally recognized, otherwise known as diagnosed, as who they think they are, which of course can involve money or long wait lists to find a provider only to have this provider say, "Oh, I'm sorry, you're only 72% this. You have to be 75% this in order to be able to use that label."

But we don't have that medical quantification for being a woman or being a person of color or any other diversity factor, right. You don't go to like, "I'm sorry, you're only 72% lesbian or Latino," or we don't need to quantify those aspects. And in my personal opinion, while sometimes you do need those papers to maybe get extended time on the bar exam or something like that. In most cases, I feel it's a matter of an identity and with every identity comes strengths and weaknesses. And as a human, we all have both. It's not like only neurodivergents have superpowers.

Neurodivergents have superpowers like everybody else, but we also come with a lot of kryptonite, and being able to have people be empathetic for your kryptonite, just like you should be empathetic for theirs allows everybody's strengths to work well. And it could be as simple as I am an early bird, and you're a night owl, so I'll take first shift, you take second, and we'll be covered. Or you need eyeglasses, and you wear them, and we move on. It's not something that we need to have any shame about. And there's also a huge bias against women.

There's a lot of stereotypes that specifically, and I'll focus on autism just for the moment, that if you look in media or if you look wherever, most stories about autism feature children or young white boys or young white cisgender or young white cisgender, privileged, Northern European, that's because those

exams, those tests were made to focus on that. So a lot of the bumper stickers or autism awareness logos you see are bright primary colors, which fosters that stereotype that this is a kid thing and people grow out of it, and they don't.

Or it's a blue thing, and it's not a boy thing, and it's part of our life. Neurodivergence, I feel, have been on the planet since the beginning of time, right. You think of our first hunters and gatherers, our first tribes on the planet, right. There usually was one or two people in each group that saw things a little bit differently. Maybe they knew how to read the signs of the environment to know, "Okay, we should migrate, or the deer are doing this, or this leaf can cure and this leaf cannot."

And that difference was accepted, and if not valued. And if we all think or thought different or think the same way, you are not going to get that innovation. And when companies can embrace neurodiversity and help remove those biases, there is a firm business case that it leads to revenue, it leads to value, it leads to new innovation. So it's a matter of why not, especially when a lot of businesses are battling this skills gap.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

That brings up the advancement idea, as you just said. There is a lot of underemployment or unemployment for people with disabilities, people with neurodiversity. So the business cases, I would imagine part of the reason that IBM went after this and made sure that this was an important program. But in your words, why did IBM decide, "We really need to focus on this area?"

Nat Lyckowski, IBM's Global Neurodiversity Advancement Leader:

It's actually an interesting story because IBM, for over 100 years, have been embracing diversity as something we're very proud of. One of the first companies to focus on equal pay for equal work or hiring people regardless of race, religion a hundred years ago. One of the first to cover same-sex partner, medical benefits, or even genetics. So why weren't we in the forefront? And it actually took one of my colleagues, very good friend was at the United Nations for World Autism Day and saw what other companies were doing and was like, "Whoa, we got to start doing things." And that was, I don't know, eight, 10 years ago. And it's really exciting to see how it's grown. And other companies are working on this. We're actually part of that disability in Roundtable, where companies that are focusing on our diversity come together to share best practices, which is great.

I'm very proud of the work that we're doing at IBM for a couple of main reasons. The main differences that I see is our neurodiversity program is run and led by neurodivergents, and that shouldn't be a, "Wow, look at you." But there's a very large disparity in the disability and neurodiversity communities of programs being run by allies. "Oh, I have a Ph.D. in this." So that makes me an expert, just as if I had a Ph.D. in Black studies that would not make me... that would make me a great ally. But you have to have that sense of representation. If it was a women's initiative run by all men, people would quickly say, "There's an issue here." So that's one thing we are very proud of is that we are run and led by neurodivergents. We have psychological safe space virtual channels for IBM employees that are neurodivergent themselves that help vet and steer our initiatives.

So we can say, "What do we want to do for April as autism month?" Actually, April is Neurodiversity Advancement Month. At IBM, we expanded it, but that we have those, and that we're global. So we're working on neurodiversity initiatives. We've had targeted hiring programs in over 11 countries. We've touched IBMers in over 65 countries. We've had over 13,000 IBMers complete our Neurodiversity Acceptance Training. And this past year, we started our Neurodivergent-Out Executive Program and our Neurodivergent Executive Allies. So if you stop and think how wonderful to have an IBM vice president

come out and say, "I'm bipolar, and I've been here, and I'm dyslexic, and I'm here," and be able to talk about these things and talk about not only accommodations for being who you are, but just a success enabler of how best you work and that we want your talents, and we want your energies to focus on the business and not have to mask or not have to be worrying about hiding your authentic self.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

You yourself identify as neurodivergent. In what way?

Nat Lyckowski, IBM's Global Neurodiversity Advancement Leader:

I like to share that I'm just neurodivergent, and I like that term because it doesn't for me go into the depths of HIPAA, right. I don't have to share my exact information unless I want to. I know also that I personally feel that sometimes the labels are blurred, right. Is it that DSM-5 that says you're A but not B or B but not C? So for me personally, I just use that I'm neurodivergent. I was recognized that as neurodivergent in college. So the first part of my life, I thought I was broken or stupid or lazy or, "What's wrong with you? How come you can't pay attention? Or how come you don't understand this?

Or how come it takes you twice as long to do these things?" And that leads to depression, that leads to self-doubt, and all of that combining to having this aha moment. And it's almost like finding out you're left-handed, right. I've been struggling trying to use my right hand this whole time, and things just got easier. Now, granted, a lot of the tech that we have now, like voice-to-text and text-to-voice and everything, we didn't have a lot of audiobooks 20-plus years ago. So I think technology is really starting to level the playing field to make things more accessible in general.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

And I would imagine as you identified and learn this in college, just as you're beginning a professional career, it must have made finding work difficult, whether it's your own, maybe lack of... I don't want to put words in your mouth, but your own lack of confidence. Your own experience.

Nat Lyckowski, IBM's Global Neurodiversity Advancement Leader:

Yeah. I've been with IBM about 30 years, and I did not come out at work probably until 2015, 2016, where things were harder, where I was spending a lot of time worrying about being me, worrying about is that acceptable. Double checking, triple checking things, wasting a lot of time and energy, trying to fit in, trying to read the room, being around people talking about neurodiversity, about... You hear people say the word, and it makes you feel safe, right.

If somebody shares their pronouns with you, "Hi, my name is them. My pronouns are she/her," they feel instantly, or they should hopefully feel instantly at peace to say, "Oh, my pronouns are they/them or he/her." And it let instantly lets the person know that they're among peers. And I think just saying the word, talking about it, giving it a voice is allowing more people to come ND out and be heard. It's almost like a snowball effect.

We have a lot of our NDers have helped others, and I always get emotional. Somebody that I took on as a mentee took on a mentee, and we're now on our fourth iteration of these things going on, and it's so refreshing. It's so exciting. There are sometimes, oops, and agile moments are the times that we have to course correct, but we have that in everything. And if we can't... You can't do anything without risk. If you're not going to ask some of the hard questions, then the conversation sometimes is not going to be meaningful.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

As a representative for IBM in this space, and I know you go around and talk to people, kind of your last thoughts on what would you say to other businesses, big and small, why this has been such a valuable experience for the employee and the employer and why they should think about this and do something about not just think, but act.

Nat Lyckowski, IBM's Global Neurodiversity Advancement Leader:

I like to think of it as a no-brainer. It's good for your corporate citizenship, right. "Look at us. We are trying to help a minority community. Look at us. We are..." From the neurodivergent standpoint, I can now be gainfully employed, whereas I think there was like a 40% under an unemployment of college-educated autistics in the US. So individuals that are eager to become financially independent now confined roles, you now get empathetic managers.

You now get more innovation with a huge ROI, right. It costs nothing to say to your employee, "I want you to be able to sit in the office where you work best," and have the person say, "I don't work well sitting next to the kitchenette, right. It's too noisy. I keep getting distracted. Can we change the layout?" Or just have a conversation about that.

Have social contracts, like we're going to raise our hand when we do this, or if we are going to have a meeting, we're going to have an agenda, and if we put stuff on a bulletin board, we're going to give people time to review it, not just at that meeting. We want your thoughts by Friday. This way, you don't have to read it and act all in that same space because some people reading might take a little longer or English might not be their first language, and it hits all of these universal design points.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Thank you, Nat. Beautifully said, and I really appreciate you taking the time to talk with me.

Nat Lyckowski, IBM's Global Neurodiversity Advancement Leader:

Absolutely. Thank you so much, Ramona. And everybody always asks me, what can I do to be more neurodivergent friendly? I answer that question with another question, which is, how are you friendly towards women? How are you friendly towards people of color? The answer is the same, and you just listen.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation editor-in-chief:

Nat Lyckowski, IBM's Global Neurodiversity Advancement Leader, thanks again. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-Chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for joining us on the Work in Progress podcast. Thanks for listening.