

Dr Lisa Belanger:

Hello and welcome back to The Science of Work, where I, Dr. Lisa Belanger, take a deep dive into the habits, skills, and work design for the global trends in today's workforce.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

We talk about optimizing work design. A very important aspect of work design is that it's not prescriptive. It needs to be individualized. Different brains need different design. It's not something we often talk about. Neurodiversity refers to the variation in the human brain regarding social ability, learning, attention, and mood. This can include people with autism spectrum disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia and Tourette syndrome, just to name a few. These concepts considers that certain developmental disorders are normal variations of the brain, and that people who have these traits have certain strengths. Neurodiversity is not the same as disability, and we have to stop talking about it as such. So what does this mean at work? How, as leaders, can we design for ourselves and for the people that we lead?

Dr Lisa Belanger:

In this episode, we speak to Dr. Ty McKinney, who has a PhD in neuroscience, is the CEO of 8 Bit Cortex, a mental health tech company, he is the research director of Branch Out Neurological Foundation, and I've had the pleasure of working with him as a consultant with my company ConsciousWorks. Ty designs educational content, provides analytical services, and develops evidence based resources to promote brain health.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

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Dr Lisa Belanger:

Neurodiversity at work is both a new concept requiring some fundamental education and shifts in the workplace, but also an opportunity. We need to think differently about tasks that need to be done and what strengths different individuals have. Research has shown that some conditions like autism and dyslexia can grant special skills in pattern recognition, memory, or mathematics. Conditions like ADHD might be drawn to entrepreneurial thinking or sales with those quick dopamine hits and rapid change. Many neurodiverse people in a community that have otherwise faced unemployment, in some of these groups, is as high as 85 to 90% unemployment. Approximately one in six children has been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder, and approximately 6.1% of people have ADHD. According to the International Dyslexia Association, 15 to 20% of the population have some sort of dyslexia symptoms, including slow or inaccurate reading, poor spelling, poor writing, or mixing up similar words.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

So what can we do about it? Employers can create different jobs for different kinds of workers, allow for different work schedules and environments, make flexible work design, focus on the positive traits of neurodivergent workers. For example, workers with autism pay attention to complex details and have very good memories, which can assist in certain roles and jobs, for example tech.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

Qualitative research done by Walkowiak in 2021 found that including workers diagnosed with autism is transformational in digital tech industries in a positive way, reduces hiring discrimination, improves management of mental health and psychosocial risks at the workplace. It benefits neurotypical employees as well. Sutherland in 2016, stated that from an employer perspective, this is not necessarily a question of being socially conscious, but of being attuned to the possible benefits and even competitive advantages that may be possible from having employees that think differently.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

If we start thinking through it, there's definitely some neuro atypical people that have started and had incredible success. Everyone from Steve Job to Richard Branson had dyslexia and composers such as Mozart with ADHD and even Shakespeare would be diagnosed in today's world with ADHD. There's been some companies doing an incredible job of strategically hiring neurodiverse people. DXC Technology in Australia has seen a 30 to 40% improve productivity due to this change in hiring practice. The program provides an environment that supports and celebrates the talents and skills in newer diverse people, such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia, and helps build valuable skills. There's an autism at work program in most countries. And IT companies that have leveraged this are companies like Microsoft, IBM, JP Morgan Chase and Co. So what can we be doing and how should we be thinking about leveraging and understanding and promoting the hiring of neurodiverse people? We'll talk to Dr. McKinney and find out. What exactly is neurodiversity?

Dr Ty McKinney:

To me, neurodiversity is just appreciating the fact that when we're in the womb, our brain is trying to anticipate the world in which we're going to try to live and grow up in and is trying to hedge as many bets as it can. And because we all grew up in different places with different parents, our brain is always trying to figure that out in different ways. So as a result, everyone's brain is going to be unique and you can't necessarily have a one size fits all approach. I think really that's at the heart of neurodiversity, is realizing that if you do have a one size fits all approach, someone's inevitably going to be left behind.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

And I think this is so interesting because I started talking about humans as if they're systems or brains in which we hire to perform for us. And that sounds inhumane, and that's not what I'm trying to do. It's this idea that we need our brains functioning at their best, and really as managers and leaders, we're trying to encourage these brains to be productive, to be creative, to be innovative. And so how do we do this, knowing that all brains are well slightly different?

Dr Ty McKinney:

Well, I think this is where it takes really getting to know your team as individuals and figure out what is the ways in which their brain needs particular support, in which mechanisms of accountability will also help them achieve their full potential and their biggest productivity, and is trying to put both those two together on a case by case basis that I think is really what we end up having to do.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

And you know what? I thought this conversation was going to go slightly different when I even talked to neurodiversity, I thought you were going to give basically clinical examples of what that could be, and

I'm sure we'll get into that, but regardless of those clinical diagnoses or possibilities, every brain is different. You're trying to figure out what works for that individual. And certainly there's an accountability piece for the individual themselves know a little bit more and have that self-reflection on what they need to perform..

Dr Ty McKinney:

For the individual it's really getting to know yourself and learning what are the triggers that might send you into a little bit of a spiral, what are the different kinds of support systems that really help you thrive. For example, I thrive when I've got a reasonable amount of structure. It's like when I've got a routine or a rhythm that I can get behind and I don't have to think as much and plan out what I need to do, then it becomes a little more automatic and it's easier for me to execute on those things.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

Right. Being able to have goal posts or having some structure. During the pandemic and being forced to work at home, has this impacted your productivity, knowing that you thrive on that structure, or were you able to create that structure right away?

Dr Ty McKinney:

It took me a while to try to create some bad structure. And I was really fortunate that where I was living at the time, things were not closed as much as they were in other parts of the country, but it definitely took quite some time. And a lot of days where I just would accomplish two hours worth of work, but I would spend eight hours attempting to get it done, just because if you're in your kitchen the entire day and that's all you can really do. And oh, I've already went for three walks a day.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

Oh for sure. I think a lot of us thrive on having a little bit of structure at the very least. But to your point, there are some people that can create that for themselves and jump into that. And then there's some that take a minute to try to figure out what those systems are, because during COVID we removed ourselves from a lot of systems we may or may not have known were in place. Our habits changed. Our environment changed and our social environment changed, which is all the things we usually rely on to have these structure in place. What can we do to be more inclusive, as a leader, as a teammate, to have a greater understanding of neurodiversity at work?

Dr Ty McKinney:

I think the first thing we can do is just not assume things. Everyone's coming towards the team with their own skillset, their own background, their own experiences. And the moment you start making assumptions about what a person needs or is like without validating those assumptions with that said individual, then that's where problems can start to come awry. Being able to listen, I think is highly underrated. I've talked lots about active listening skills. And I think that if you're able to practice those with your team, you're really going to find out what exactly is the things that they're going to benefit from. And you might be surprised in the ways which it brings you joy to give them tho that support.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

And we talk about neurodiversity and I love that in a previous episode, we talked about resilience and the orchids and the dandelions. Some people will grow anywhere and push through and some need

particular circumstances, the exact right light and soil to really thrive, but when they do, man, are they beautiful. When we talk about neurodiversity, it's not a bad thing. And it's very much something that we're trying to as leaders really out of people for a bunch of different reasons. I know you know that, can you provide any examples or give more thought on that concept?

Dr Ty McKinney:

There's two different directions I could take that. I'll do both of them because I think they're complimentary to each other. The first one is the Neurodiversity Movement in general. It actually originally sprung up with autism spectrum disorder. It's a group of people that were perceived as being less capable in the work environment because of some of the social limitations they had, but it turns out all they needed was the right scenario to thrive in. And that scenario was the tech environment in the Silicon Valley area. And now you have a group of people that are highly successful because what was previously viewed as weird quirks was suddenly now very adaptive for the workplace, but the orchids and dandelions metaphor that you're using that actually comes from some research by Bruce Ellis at the University of Utah.

Dr Ty McKinney:

He was really looking at how kids that grew up in what we would typically call a challenging circumstances, adverse childhood experiences, impoverished scenarios, those sorts of things. And he really wanted to figure out like, "Okay, these kids have a number of deficits in several ways, but what are the things that they're good at?" And really trying to reframe the question to thinking about, "Okay, how can we explore their advantages they bring to the scenario?" And that's where the orchids and dandelions started to merge as like, "Oh, well there's different responses to those environments." And for some people exactly, as you said, they might be really, really sensitive to interpersonal formation and this can hamper them. But if they're in a supporter environment that's sensitivity to interpersonal formation can make them excellent collaborators and negotiators.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

Absolutely. And we even think about how leadership is changing now. We used to value different things and now, number one is empathy and relations. They've always been part of it, but these are now emerging as being an absolute must. So those people will now thrive in those positions. But if we think of something like ADHD, there's particular positions that they gravitate towards, can you speak a little bit more on that?

Dr Ty McKinney:

What do you think about ADHD, whether not it's a confirmed clinical diagnosis or someone is ADHD light, so to speak, the general traits that tend to go along with those groups of people is, they seek out a lot of external stimulation. They get bored really easily, they're driven to try to cure that boredom. As a result of that, they tend to have a much higher risk tolerance. They tend not to be the most organized, but on the flip side, that means they're very able to rapidly shift between tasks. They're really good at multitasking, task switching, so to speak. And if you think about that collection of skills that describes entrepreneurs really well, I've actually spoke a few times about how the traits that make up ADHD actually really predispose people for being excellent entrepreneurs. Because they've got a lot of innate skills and tendencies that are rewarded in that scenario.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

There's actually an odd number of ER doctors that have ADHD because obviously constant changing environment, sales people that have ADHD because of that dopamine hit of getting the sale. There seems to be these things that we're playing around and we're not putting people in boxes. We're trying to find the box that fits them. And I don't know if that analogy works, but you're trying to find something that suits your brain. That's really important to acknowledge and have that self awareness for and greater understanding for. But I think it does start in our education system. We've been grown up thinking that there is a way of doing things.

Dr Ty McKinney:

Yeah. There simply is not a single way of doing things. When you think about, there is a literature and whether you're more of an auditory versus a visual learner, you enjoy tactile. Whenever there's context, we tend to enjoy the learning process a lot more and get more out of it. But I want to go back to what you said about, don't put people in boxes, find the box that works for the person. I really do like that metaphor. I think I'm going to have to start using it.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

Thank you so much. I didn't know if it worked or not, but I think that that's the case, is like, well you're not X, Y, Z, well maybe not, but there's something else. We all have these skill sets and then our brain gravitates towards. And I think that the way that our education system set up and even what we're rewarded for from society, doesn't always celebrate these differences or encourage them.

Dr Ty McKinney:

I think actually anxiety is a really good example of this. Anxiety is an emotion that everyone has experienced. If you ever worried about what's going to happen tomorrow, you've experienced anxiety. But if you take that emotion to an extreme, it can also be a clinical condition where one could get a diagnosis. And because people with anxiety they're really, really motivated to not experience the things that they fear, the things that they worry about, and this can be devastating for some people, as they start to avoid scenarios like large public gatherings or interacting with certain people they might have anxiety around and it can be debilitating. But on the flip side, these are people that are really good at proactively managing risk. If you have a position like a lawyer, like a compliance officer, something along those lines where you need boxes being ticked in order to mitigate risk, these people really thrive at those positions. Try not to label someone as having anxiety, but instead you can find that box where the person with anxiety can properly thrive, where they can use their worry for good.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

And just before this conversation, before we started recording, we talked about the risks of putting people in boxes or clinical diagnoses. There's benefits to it. Could you talk a little bit about those risks and those benefits to putting somebody in a box?

Dr Ty McKinney:

Well, I guess I would start by saying that at the end of the day, all these labels are just that, they're labels. They're things that we as humans, namely psychiatrists have come up with to try to categorize people and try to find ways to help them. But there is no shortage to the academic literature showing how those labels are flawed and they miss some people or they over pathologize certain things. When I was in my PhD, I started off in a clinical psychology program and I was actually shocked to learn that a

lot of people are not given a diagnosis necessarily because it fits them best. But because that diagnosis is what's going to give them access to services and resources, that might be beneficial.

Dr Ty McKinney:

There's a lot of people out there that might have a diagnosis of depression, not because they're depressed, but by having a diagnosis, they're able to get anti antidepressant medications or this is what's going to allow them to get reimbursed for a therapy. I think we really do run a risk when we put labels on people and put them into those boxes that the label might not even be accurate to begin with. And then you start to view someone as the label, rather than a person that just has a particular quirk.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

Agreed. And I think that respecting everybody's brain's different. Who are we to say yours is too different or more different, in a way that's productive. And we talked about some of the benefits being access to care, but some of the negative things being everything from being prejudged on what you are capable of doing when it just might not be the case. When it comes to telling people about some of these diagnosis, whether it be autism or ADHD or anxiety or depression, should we do it and should we do it in a work context?

Dr Ty McKinney:

It all depends on the individual that you're disclosing this information to and whether or not there's been a sufficient buildup of empathy and connection. One of the things I think is actually wonderful that's happened as a result of COVID as we've actually shed a lot of the stigma around mental health conditions. I think that's absolutely beautiful. I wish that could have been in place 10 years ago for all the advances made. But despite that advance, there is still some residual stigma. It's still hard for some people to disclose like, "Hey, I have ADHD" or "I struggle with depression." There's a bit of a personal judgment there in a sense of shame, but it can be incredibly empowering to share that with someone that you trust and for them to like, "Wow, I didn't realize that you're going through that in that capacity."

Dr Ty McKinney:

Particularly in the workplace, I think that it can be really empowering if your manager, the team that you're working with, understands that this isn't you trying to get an easy pass. It's you trying to find a way to work with them. Is like, "Hey, I've got some challenges. I want to work with you. I want to do a better version myself. And I just need a little bit of help to achieve that full potential. Can you help me?"

Dr Lisa Belanger:

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Dr Lisa Belanger:

You said something before the call too, that I thought was so powerful because I do think, we need to learn more about these conditions. We have to have these conversations to understand how they're

different and how they perform differently and what amazing skills they can bring to the work environment. But you said, and I think this is me calling myself out on this as a manager and a leader too, is "Ask the questions and listen. Ask them what they need, ask them how to accommodate and how they get their best work done and see if that's something that can fit within your team." Is there any other suggestions you have for a leader who's leading somebody that's either disclosed this information or because you're leading more than, I don't know, four people, they probably will have one of these conditions.

Dr Ty McKinney:

I think the important thing is just to keep an open mind and don't feel fair means everyone has to be treated the same. Going back to the starting of our conversations, the concept neurodiverse, we've all got different brains. We've all got different things that work for us and don't work for us. And when you apply a one size fits all approach, you're inevitably going to exclude that one out of four people that struggles with the mental health challenge. So if you acknowledge like, "Oh, maybe this person needs a little bit of extra flexibility in their hours," or maybe "this person needs a few extra reminders." Those things can go a long way just to help compensate whatever struggles they might have and give them the support and the accountability necessary to really rise up to their full potential, to be the orchid that we know they can be.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

You raised a couple of really good points around accountability. We've talked a lot about it and how important it is and how important the leader's role could be in that. And I think that's really important for leaders to understand, acknowledge and create systems for, it's not to make more work, it's to think through things differently. And we talk about accommodating for them, but it's for us as well. They have skills, that's why you hired them, that's very excited to work with them. Are there things you can do so that those are coming out so that it's really represented in their work?

Dr Ty McKinney:

I think right now, because we're starting to shed some of the stigma around mental health, there's this idea that we need to be very, very supportive of those people. But I think that it is some important to appreciate that from a purely scientific and therapeutic perspective, the accountability is necessary for the growth. To illustrate this, it's actually good to go back to anxiety. People with anxiety, they have a situation or an event that they fear. And in order for them to heal, their brain action needs to engage a new learning to realize that their fears are unvalidated. And if you are overly supportive, you can actually prevent people from having that learning experience. I think this is where the dance of managers and leaders comes in. How do you ensure that there is that accountability, but be as supportive as necessary to get them to the point of being able to do the last step themselves? And unfortunately, there's no clear answer for that. That's an art. That's why therapists are so valuable as individuals, because they help us figure that out for ourselves.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

As a leader, this is where the coaching and the listening really comes into play to try to figure that out and to try to marry that dance. And while you're certainly not a therapist, that's not the point. It's we with every single person, how can we allow them? What can we do so that they can do their best work? How can I guide? How can I support? And it's trying to figure that out for each individual, no different than anybody else. It just might be different tactics involved.

Dr Ty McKinney:

A general tactic that I would really suggest that managers use is just be willing to be patient with people. When you have a mental health challenge, you're going to have good days and you're going to have bad days. And it's really important to realize that not every day can be good. And if you can be patient with people on their bad days, that's going to give them the support necessary to really grow on their good days. From a behavior change perspective, I know this is your area of expertise. If you're able to provide an environment so that habits can be as sustainable as possible, so that way someone does have a lapse as someone with a mental health challenge inevitably will, it's not a big deal. Things move on. You just need to have the support and structure in place. And that way the mistakes become just mistakes and they have the opportunity to be corrected, and it's not damning someone to consequences that might be beyond their control.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

So it is, you've said so many things in that statement, psychological safety, to be able to have these conversations, to even just say when something's working or not working for you, but also from a behavior change standpoint, anybody particularly those that are more neurodiverse responds so well to positive reinforcement. Really being able to think less of punishment, but more about really congratulating the wins. And as a leader, especially in times of stress, this can be really difficult to fit in or to make sure that it's set up. I know a lot of leaders over COVID have started putting it in their calendar to be like, "Reach out to employees to say they're doing a really great job." This becomes even more important. I think it's important for everyone to have that positive reinforcement and to make sure that they're getting proper reward systems for things done well, but especially those that are neurodiverse.

Dr Ty McKinney:

100%, both with punishment and reinforcement are natural forces that help our brain figure out what is appropriate. But life is going to punish us enough, so why do we, as leaders need to add more of that in. But everyone responds to positive reinforcement, so that's actually a very generalizable useful tool. Again, if you're approaching leadership from an empathetic perspective and you acknowledge that the productivity will come later after you have psychological safety in place, I think that's really the good mindset that you want to have, because that's going to facilitate the growth mindset in your team and your employees. And as long as you're willing to be patient when they inevitably make some mistakes, then hopefully they'll have everything that they need in order to really thrive in the position and they'll grow into what you hope they can become.

Dr Lisa Belanger:

Let's think differently and creatively about the skills required for work and how we can best accommodate individuals and leverage their skillset. This will have a tremendous impact on the individual's self-esteem, financial success, our economy, and also immediately impact the company's bottom line. Thank you so much for listening to today's episode of The Science of Work podcast. A special thank you to Dr. Ty McKinney for a conversation on this topic and for my team behind the scenes that make this podcast possible with research and audio. For full transcripts and sources, please visit consciousworks.com. Remember, consciously design your day or somebody else will. (silence).