

De la sensibilisation à l'inclusion : effets d'une séance de sensibilisation à l'autisme sur les perceptions des collègues dans un centre de services européen

Shifting attitudes about neurodiversity: Effects of an autism awareness session on coworkers' perceptions in a European service centre workplace

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RÉSUMÉ

Les personnes neurodivergentes rencontrent d'importants obstacles pour obtenir et conserver un emploi valorisant. Il a été démontré que les pratiques d'embauches rigides, la stigmatisation au travail et le manque de sensibilisation à la neurodiversité entravent leur inclusion. La recherche s'ancre dans le milieu professionnel d'un centre de services de réparation mandaté par des fournisseurs prestataires d'équipements médicaux, aux Pays-Bas. Cette entreprise a récemment engagé une firme de recrutement pour l'embauche d'employés autistes. Cette étude s'est penchée sur le potentiel éducatif et le changement d'attitudes à l'égard de l'autisme, dans cette entreprise. Les employés en poste ont répondu à un questionnaire sur leur compréhension et leurs attitudes avant et après avoir assisté à une séance de sensibilisation. Nous avons également interrogé la personne responsable qui a supervisé l'intégration et animé la séance. Les résultats indiquent une évolution modeste, mais positive des mentalités des salariés, réduisant les préjugés et les préoccupations au travail. L'échange avec le responsable souligne l'importance d'une préparation attentive, d'une structure de soutien et d'une culture d'inclusion pour assurer la réussite à long terme. Nos résultats révèlent également l'importance d'inclusion de l'employé autiste à toutes les étapes, de la soumission de sa candidature jusqu'à son entrée en poste. Cette recherche met en lumière des stratégies concrètes pour sensibiliser les collègues à l'autisme et réduire la stigmatisation au travail. Les conclusions soulignent la nécessité pour les organisations de mettre en œuvre des pratiques proactives fondées sur l'éducation afin de créer des environnements de travail où les employés neurodivergents peuvent s'épanouir.

MOTS-CLÉS

Autisme, biais, formation, éducation, sensibilisation à la neurodiversité, lieu de travail

ABSTRACT

Neurodivergent people face significant barriers to obtaining and maintaining meaningful employment. Workplace stigma, rigid hiring practices, and a lack of neurodiversity awareness have all been shown to hinder inclusion. Set in the context of a centralized repair facility (service centre) for a medical device supplier and servicing company located in the Netherlands that recently engaged a specialist recruitment firm to hire an employee with autism, this study examined the ability of education to shift coworkers' attitudes about autism. Existing employees completed a survey about their understanding and attitudes toward autism before and after attending a brief autism awareness session. We also interviewed the manager who oversaw onboarding and delivered the autism awareness session. The findings indicate a modest yet positive shift in employees' attitudes about autism, reducing biases and workplace concerns. The managerial insights emphasize the importance of mindful preparation, a support structure, and a culture of inclusivity for ensuring long-term success. Our findings also reveal the importance of inclusion of the employee with autism at all stages. By providing real-world perspectives, this study highlights

actionable strategies for improving autism awareness among coworkers and reducing stigma in the workplace. These findings underscore the need for organizations to implement proactive education-based practices to create workplaces where neurodivergent employees can thrive.

KEYWORDS

autism, bias, training, education, neurodiversity awareness, workplace

1. INTRODUCTION

With estimates that 15–20% of people are neurodivergent (Doyle, 2020) —whether arising from autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, or another condition— neurodiversity has emerged as a critical issue in the workplace (Bruyère & Colella, 2023). Although neurodivergent people are often well educated and highly capable, many struggle to find and continue in meaningful employment. Particular attention has been paid to the experiences of people with autism¹, a complex neurodevelopmental condition characterized by differences in social interactions and communication, repetitive behaviours and restricted interests, and sensory sensitivities (APA, 2022), who face higher unemployment rates relative to other disability groups. According to recent estimates, the unemployment rate for people with autism is 52% in the Netherlands (Brouwers *et al.*, 2023), 85% in the USA (Mahto *et al.*, 2023), and 88% in the UK (Ashworth *et al.*, 2025; Sparkes *et al.*, 2021).

People with autism face challenges at all stages of employment, beginning with the hiring process. Candidates diagnosed with autism report feeling the need to hide autistic traits during job interviews and fear of discrimination if they disclose autism, as well as general frustration with a focus on social skills and inflexibility in hiring processes (Davies *et al.*, 2023). Supporting that bias toward people with autism is real, neurotypical people receive higher ratings than people with autism in mock job interviews (Whelpley & May, 2023), and 50% of surveyed managers in the UK reported that they were uncomfortable hiring neurodivergent candidates (Institute of Leadership & Management, 2020). Once employed, neurodivergent employees report microaggressions and macroaggressions, such as ableism, discrimination or exclusion in the workplace (Härtel *et al.*, 2019) and fears of being stereotyped or stigmatized by colleagues (Lindsay *et al.*, 2019). More broadly, a systematic review by Van Beukering *et al.* (2022) identified employer-related stigma as a barrier to the sustainable employment and well-being at work of people with disabilities (PWD), while noting the need for more research specifically on stigma held by coworkers. Addressing incorrect beliefs held by managers and others in the workplace may thus play an important role in supporting the employment of neurodivergent people, such as those with autism.

¹ In line with preferences in the country where this study was conducted, the authors use person-first language (De Laet *et al.*, 2023; see also Flowers *et al.*, 2023).

The present study contributes to the scant literature on best practices for onboarding employees with autism and fostering an inclusive workplace by reducing biases through education. Set in the context of a service centre workplace in the Netherlands that recently engaged a specialist recruitment firm to onboard an employee with autism, we examined the influence of a brief autism awareness session on existing employees' knowledge, beliefs and attitudes about autism. Our research question is: How does autism awareness training influence employees' perceptions toward autism in the workplace?

2. Background and theory

2.1 Autism and workplace relationships

Human relationships are one of the most complex issues in the workplace. Workplace relationships take different forms and fulfill a variety of needs and functions (Longmire & Taylor, 2023). Colleagues can provide emotional support and friendship, help with difficult situations or tasks, or support with training and career development (Colbert *et al.*, 2016). However, because workplace social environments cater to neurotypical people, expectations about workplace relationships may unintentionally marginalize employees with autism. As already noted, classical job interviews are significant barriers to employment for people with autism (Cooper *et al.*, 2018; Saleh *et al.*, 2023). Specifically, some people with autism report frustration with typical interview questions focused on social skills (e.g., “Do you prefer to work independently or on a team?”, “Give some examples of teamwork”), expressing preference to demonstrate qualifications for a job through practical methods such as a work trial (Davies *et al.*, 2023).

Once hired, people with autism often face challenges in building relationships with coworkers. In a study of adults with autism in Australia, colleague relationships were described as either the most positive *or* the most negative aspect of workplace experiences (Baldwin *et al.*, 2014). In this study, nearly half of respondents indicated difficulty communicating with or relating to coworkers, resulting in misunderstanding, criticism, and exclusion. A study by Patton (2019) found that employees with autism may be stigmatized by coworkers for not fitting into the organizational culture by avoiding small talk or other situations where they do not feel comfortable.

Employees with autism—as well as those with other invisible disabilities—also face disclosure dilemmas (Kulkarni, 2022; McAdam, 2024). Employees may prefer not to disclose autism in organizational settings to avoid judgment and fear of stigmatization and exclusion (Ohl *et al.*, 2017; Johnson & Joshi, 2016). Parallels can be found with LGBTQIA individuals “coming out” at work (Ng & Rumens, 2017). For individuals with autism or other stigmatized identities, it is a heavy mental load to know if, when, and to whom to reveal their difference. Prior studies report that disclosure of autism has both positive and negative consequences on workplace relationships. Sasson and Morrison (2019) found that disclosure positively influences first impressions in the workplace, but that employees considered “different” may also face disadvantages. For example, the belief that

certain employees are “different” could reinforce social exclusion and not being considered for promotions or salary raises. A workplace where neurodivergent employees experience discrimination or bullying has negative consequences for individuals, teams, and organizations, as these employees may suffer, be absent, or quit. Thus, fostering positive attitudes about neurodiversity is essential for achieving the goal of workplace inclusivity.

2.2 Shifting attitudes about autism in the workplace

To support the inclusion of people with autism in the workplace, Longmire and Taylor (2023) emphasize the importance of “initial attitudes, first impressions, and potential stigmatization” (p. 175). In the broader context of workplace inclusion of PWD, several studies highlight the influence of coworkers’ positive attitudes (Saqib *et al.*, 2022) and previous exposure and experiences (Stone & Colella, 1996). According to Gordon Allport’s contact theory (1954), interpersonal contact can reduce prejudices and stereotypes between a dominant and non-dominant group (which we extend to neurotypical and neurodivergent people), particularly under conditions where the two groups share common goals and equal status. Prior studies focused on autism or PWD find that both coworkers and supervisors play a role in fostering positive workplace attitudes. Song *et al.* (2017) highlighted the importance of coworkers during the socialization process of individuals with autism. Kulkarni *et al.* (2011) emphasize the role of managers as role models whose attitudes and behaviours may influence coworkers’ attitudes and expectations about new employees. They note that support from supervisors is particularly important when onboarding PWD, as they may not ask for support or disclose their difference to coworkers due to fear of negative consequences such as stigma.

An established strategy for changing attitudes about specific employee groups that face stigma is education. Hunt and Hunt (2004) demonstrated that an educational intervention had an important impact on both knowledge level and attitudes about PWD. Lee and Rodda (1994) show that negative attitudes toward PWD hinder favourable integration, concluding that negative attitudes may be rooted in a lack of knowledge, information, and persisting stereotypes. Educational interventions thus present an established strategy for challenging pre-existing beliefs to reduce bias in the workplace (Lee & Roda, 1994; Unger, 2002).

Building on the organizational interventions mitigating individual barriers (OIMIB) framework (Annabi & Lebovitz, 2018), Annabi & Locke (2019) propose that people with autism will face fewer barriers to workplace inclusion when coworkers are knowledgeable about and have positive attitudes toward autism. However, to our knowledge, there are no existing studies reporting the effects of autism education on coworkers’ attitudes about autism in a real workplace setting.

2.3 Research question and study aims

To address the above-described research gap, this study assessed the ability of education to influence perceptions about working with someone with autism. To do so, the manager was co-

creator of this initiative at the company during the ideation stage; thus, they had an interest in being a full participant to learn about the outcomes and be inclusive of that new neurodivergent employee. Existing employees at a company completed a survey before and after attending a brief, *in situ* autism awareness session led by the line manager. We also interviewed this manager to learn more about their experience working with the specialist recruitment firm, onboarding the new employee with autism, administering the educational session, and the role of an inclusive company culture in fostering neurodiversity acceptance in the workplace. From the outset, the employee with autism participated in conversations about recruitment and integration.

3. Methods

3.1 Study design and setting

The opportunity for this study arose when a European medical supply company was contacted by a specialist recruitment firm seeking to place an individual with autism. Before this employee joined the company, existing employees working in the department where the new employee would be placed were invited to complete a baseline survey of their general knowledge and attitudes about autism. Approximately 6 months after the employee with autism was hired, an autism awareness session was provided as part of a regular workplace meeting. Three days later, the same employees who completed the baseline survey and attended the meeting were invited to complete an identical follow-up survey. The content of both surveys was developed by one author of this study. The manager was interviewed at the end of the study period. More details in section 2. 2.

The workplace where this study was set is a centralized repair facility (service centre) for a medical device supplier and servicing company located in the Netherlands. The company is part of a larger medical device manufacturing company employing more than 95,000 employees in over 150 countries. In 2023, the company was contacted by an external agency specializing in the placement and support of individuals with autism. At that time, the company had an employee resource group (ERG) for employees who identify as having a disability or form of neurodivergence but lacked a formal program to recruit people with autism within the Netherlands and any targets for neurodiversity.

3.2 Survey of awareness and attitudes about autism

A total of 122 existing employees in the workplace intending to onboard a new employee with autism were identified and received email invitations to complete the survey. The survey was optional, and no information was given about the reason for the survey. The survey was administered using an online tool familiar to all employees. Employees were given two weeks to complete the survey and one reminder was sent. The same employees were invited to complete the follow-up survey using the same method.

The 36-item survey was based on prior research about knowledge and attitudes toward autism (Nicholas *et al.*, 2019) and organized into five sections:

- I. prior experience with autism: 2 items assessing whether they know someone with autism or have received any autism-related training;
- II. awareness of organizational initiatives related to neurodiversity: two items assessing knowledge of company inclusive hiring strategies;
- III. knowledge about autism: 20 items assessing general autism-related knowledge, including prevalence rates, diagnosis, common challenges experienced by people with autism, and stereotypes about autism;
- IV. concerns about working with someone with autism: nine items assessing the level of concern [rated from one (“no concern”) to five (“serious concern”)] related to various workplace activities; and
- V. comfort related to workplace relationships with someone with autism: three items assessing the level of confidence hiring, working with, or coaching someone with autism [scored from one (“very hesitant”) to five (“very confident”)].

3.3 Autism awareness session

The same employees targeted for the survey were asked to attend a standard workplace meeting where the autism awareness session was presented. The session took approximately 15 minutes of the 1-hour meeting and was led by their usual manager. In this way, the employee was not singled out, but was introduced providing their background as a neurodivergent individual, with some education provided around what that entails. Other topics on the agenda include topics of general interest to the team and could range from other HR related topics to facility and operational review topics. The employee with autism was present at the awareness session.

The content of the awareness session was prepared by an author of this study (who was not in attendance at the meeting) and motivated by the findings from the baseline survey of employees’ attitudes and awareness about autism, aiming to correct commonly held misperceptions. The presented information included diagnostic criteria, autism prevalence rates, common challenges experienced by people with autism (e.g., difficulty with social communication, difficulty adapting to change, sensory hypersensitivity, etc.), cognitive strengths of some people with autism (e.g., high attention to detail), and common co-occurring conditions (including mental health conditions). The company already had broader initiatives and awareness campaigns in place around diversity, inclusion, and equity. There were no specific programs targeted at neurodiversity, hence the dedicated focus in this area. The current presentation highlighted that autism presents differently across individuals and that the challenges experienced by one person are not necessarily reflective of all people with autism. Time was available at the end of the session for questions and answers.

3.4 Analysis

Findings from the baseline survey of employees' attitudes and awareness about autism are presented using descriptive statistics. Statistical analysis focuses on the survey items yielding quantitative responses, i.e. (iv) concerns about working with someone with autism and (v) comfort related to workplace relationships with someone with autism. To understand how the autism awareness session influenced survey responses, we identified employees who completed the survey at both time points. Changes in scores of pre- and post-autism awareness session scores were assessed using paired t-tests. The level of statistical significance was set as $p < 0.05$.

The 1-hour interview with the manager was conducted over MS Teams and transcribed. The content of the interview was analyzed by thematic analysis.

4. Results

4.1 Baseline employee understanding and attitudes about autism

Of the 122 employees invited to complete the baseline survey, 48 responses were received (participation rate of 39%). Of these, 13 employees (27%) reported personally knowing someone with autism. Very few employees (5%) reported having any autism-related training in the previous 2 years and awareness of company inclusive hiring strategies was similarly low, with 26% of respondents believing the company did not have such policies and 37% saying they did not know. Notably, 10–20% of respondents held stereotyped beliefs about autism, including that they “always avoid eye contact,” “always have restrictive or repetitive behaviours,” “never have intellectual disability,” and “always have an extraordinary talent.”

Of the 36 survey items, only 16 were fully answered (item response rates of 60–100%). Items appearing later in the survey were less likely to be completed, suggesting a degree of response fatigue.

4.2 Effects of autism awareness session on employees' knowledge and attitudes

The baseline and post-autism awareness session surveys were completed by 21 employees (17 men and 4 women, which is representative of the employees in the study setting). Notably, 90% of these respondents said they had not had any autism education in the past 2 years, suggesting they did not consider the autism awareness session to be formal training. The short awareness session was not intended to replace formal training as its purpose was to initiate a conversation and to increase baseline awareness about neurodiversity inclusion in the workplace.

Table 1 presents the scores for the 9 survey items related to concerns about working with someone with autism. As shown, scores for all items decreased after participating in the autism awareness session. Notably, two of the largest changes were for items related to employees feeling they had the knowledge/capabilities to support coworkers with special needs and discomfort/unfamiliarity having someone with autism in the workplace. After the session, employees felt less

discomfort/unfamiliarity toward autism compared to before the session; therefore, the awareness session had a meaningful effect on reducing feelings of unease. There were also significant decreases in concerns about overall staff's attitudes/awareness about autism and managerial ability to support employees with general disabilities.

Tableau 1

Scores for survey items relating to concerns about working with someone with autism at baseline and after the autism awareness session.

Survey item	Baseline	Post-awareness session	t	p
Productivity concerns	2.15	1.75	1.25	0.23
Safety concerns	2.00	1.80	0.95	0.36
Knowledge/capabilities to accommodate special needs	3.15	2.55	2.36	0.03 *
Ability for individuals with autism to do the work needed	2.11	2.05	0.42	0.68
Cost associated with accommodation of disabilities	1.89	1.50	1.29	0.22
Discomfort or unfamiliarity	S	2.00	3.01	0.008 **
Customers' awareness and attitudes	2.16	1.70	1.46	0.16
Staff attitudes and awareness	2.47	1.60	2.61	0.02 *
Supervisors' skills and capabilities	2.58	2.05	2.26	0.04 *

Data are presented at the mean score. Responses ranged from 1 to 5, with a higher score indicating greater concerns. Paired t-tests were used to assess changes across the two-time points. * p <0.05, ** p <0.01

Employees also answered three survey items regarding their confidence interacting with someone with autism in three workplace contexts: interviewing/hiring, working alongside, and mentoring/coaching. As shown in Table 2, average confidence scores across all three contexts were higher after the autism awareness session, although changes from the baseline were not statistically significant.

Tableau 2

Scores for survey items relating to confidence interacting with someone with autism in the workplace in specific contexts before and after the autism awareness session.

Survey item	Baseline	Post-awareness session	t	p
Confidence to hire/interview someone with autism	2.86	3.20	-0.95	0.36
Confidence to work with someone with autism	3.14	3.45	-1.10	0.28
Confidence to coach/mentor someone with autism	2.81	3.25	-1.53	0.14

Data are presented at the mean score. Responses ranged from 1 to 5, with a higher score indicating greater confidence. Paired t-tests were used to assess changes across the two-time points.

4.3 Insights from the managerial interview

Three themes emerged from analysis of the interview with the manager who oversaw onboarding of the employee with autism and delivered the autism awareness session.

The first theme, Mindful Preparation, emerges from descriptions of the 10-week preparation phase tailored to support the new employee with autism that the manager believes led to successful onboarding. The manager noted that neither he nor the company's larger leadership team had experience—professionally or personally—with autism when they were contacted by the specialist recruitment agency. Education was thus a crucial part of preparation: in addition to the autism awareness session described above, a management information session was held to “bring us up to speed on what is autism, the different levels of autism, how to interact with a person with autism, etc.” The manager adds “The management training was held by the specialized recruitment firm and the objective was to give every one of the management team a better understanding of neurodiversity in the workplace.” The specialist recruitment agency also made useful preparatory suggestions, and the candidate with autism toured the service centre to ensure they found the work environment suitable before being hired, stating: “We really collaborated with the person with autism in order to take into account personal opinions and preferences.” Throughout the interview the manager reflected on the “time and efforts creating the support structure for the employee with autism. . . just to make sure that we are successful,” suggesting that employment be a goal shared by both the company and the new employee.

The second theme, Support Structure, reflects details of the comprehensive support put in place to support the new employee with autism during onboarding and to “create a safe environment.” The core of the support structure was a “buddy system” involving three selected coworkers to support the new employee during training. Although the manager emphasized the particular importance of this support structure at the onset of employment, he noted that, 18 months into employment, the formal support structure was “no longer there because the person with autism is feeling at ease,” adding that “I think this says a lot, as the employee with autism had around 30 jobs in the last five years.”

The third theme, Culture of Inclusivity, emerged from descriptions of the company's ongoing efforts to support a diverse workforce that includes, but extends beyond, neurodiversity: “Inclusion and diversity are super important for us and the company. We are a very diverse team, for example, with 26 different nationalities.” The manager described his efforts to ensure that all employees felt comfortable during both informal workplace social interactions (e.g., conversations “next to the coffee machine”) and expressing themselves at more formal meetings, observing that the employee with autism was now “very comfortable asking a question now to me in front of a group of 130 people.” He felt that an inclusive company culture and leadership style could positively influence overall workplace acceptance, noting that no one expressed negative attitudes or concerns about the integration of the employee with autism. The manager also shared that the

company actively assessed benchmarks for inclusivity through a twice-annual organizational health survey, stating that recent increases in inclusivity measures now meant the company was in the “world class range.”

5. Discussion

Set in the real-world context of a European medical supply company, our study makes several contributions to the literature on fostering neurodiversity inclusion in the workplace.

First, by surveying the same employees before and after a brief autism awareness session designed to dispel common stereotypes, we demonstrate the ability of education to reduce concerns about working with someone with autism. Despite the small sample size, we found significant reductions in self-reported discomfort/unfamiliarity with autism, concerns about having the knowledge/capability to work with people with autism, concerns about staff attitudes and awareness of autism, and concerns about supervisors/skills and capabilities related to autism. Concerns across all other areas covered by the surveys—such as productivity, safety, and customer attitudes—were also lower after the awareness session, although the changes did not differ significantly from the baseline. Similarly, self-reported confidence interacting with someone with autism across various workplace contexts (interviewing, working work, mentoring) was higher after the awareness session, although the change from the baseline was not statistically significant.

These findings of a modest, positive shift in employees’ attitudes about autism following an awareness session are in line with other studies reporting the value of education for reducing biases. For example, Ashworth *et al.* (2022) found that completing online autism training improved both autism knowledge and commitment to inclusion in the workplace among employers from 22 organizations in the UK. Comer *et al.* (2023) found that providing evaluators with information about social and communication differences associated with autism resulted in candidates on the autism spectrum receiving higher ratings on mock job interviews. Jones *et al.* (2021) found that adults without autism who completed autism acceptance training had more positive impressions of adults with autism, lower stigma and misconceptions, higher expectations of their abilities, and were more open to meeting them. Taken together, these findings support that education can facilitate the goal of bias-free environments by correcting incorrect beliefs while simultaneously removing social barriers that are detrimental to the personal and professional well-being of adults with autism. Future studies could assess the impact of formal, comprehensive training in a similar organizational setting, comparing their effectiveness to brief awareness sessions. Such research could also explore whether extended training leads to sustained changes in attitudes, and behaviours over time.

However, the value of diversity training and educational interventions is not without its critics. Focusing on a sample of US firms, Dobbin and Kalev (2016) found that companies experienced poor

return on their diversity investments, with representation among managers of certain ethnicity groups decreasing over 5 years when mandatory diversity training was in place. Dobbin and Kalev (2022) further highlight that mandatory diversity training can activate bias or backlash against the targeted diversity groups, especially when training is in response to perceived workplace shortcomings and negative language is used. While Dobbin and Kalev's critiques predominantly pertain to ethnicity and gender diversity initiatives, neurodiversity training in the workplace is still an emerging practice and it remains to be determined whether unintended negative outcomes extend to this context. In comparison to Dobbin's research, our study differs as the person with autism was included in the entire onboarding process and present for the awareness session. The content of the session aimed to raise awareness, not to "fingerpoint" or make co-workers feel guilty. These differences may contribute to the overall success of the process and highlight the importance of inclusivity not just being a buzz word but "walking the talk."

This leads us to the reflection that autism awareness training may be less effective if it is not embedded in an inclusive organizational culture. Organizational culture is embedded in an inclusive leadership style where managers act as role models (Bourke & Titus, 2019). The managerial interview stressed the importance of keeping an "open door" policy, fostering both informal and formal exchanges with all employees, and standing up for the principle of inclusion. The manager noted that the new employee with autism was present at the meeting that included the autism awareness session and acknowledged. The focal company also encourages employees to establish and to join affinity groups, termed Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), which unite employees with similar mindsets and shared interests. Prior to this study, there had been efforts to raise awareness around neurodiversity. The company's ERG advocating for employees with disabilities, including forms of neurodiversity, is called ABLED (Awareness Benefitting Leadership & Employees About Disabilities) and aims to reflect that this group can be productive and successful at work. Thus, we propose that autism awareness education—or any initiatives aimed at fostering neurodiversity inclusion—will probably be most effective when there is already a foundation of inclusivity within the company. Specifically, prior instances of the organization actively promoting an inclusive culture, such as implementing diversity training programs, supporting ERGs, or fostering an open and accepting work environment, can create a more receptive atmosphere for such educational efforts. When employees have already been exposed to inclusive policies and practices, they may be more likely to engage with neurodiversity-related initiatives.

5.1 Implications for organizational theory and practice

As noted by Hennekam and Follmer (2024), there is limited research on the effectiveness of strategies aimed at increasing the inclusivity of neurodivergent employees. Our study aims to contribute modestly to literature by exploring approaches that may foster autism inclusivity in the workplace. In Stone and Colella's (1996) model of factors affecting the treatment of employees

with disabilities, key interactions occur among personal characteristics (e.g., perceived attributes), environmental factors (e.g., legislation), and organizational characteristics (e.g., company policies and values). These interactions are further mediated by individuals' prior exposure and experiences with PWD, as suggested by contact theory. Annabi and Locke (2019) propose a framework for successful employment of people with autism in the IT industry, emphasizing the need for organizational interventions to mitigate barriers to inclusion. Specifically, they suggest that increasing knowledge about autism will lead to more positive perceptions, which, in turn, will help reduce the barriers faced by employees. Indeed, we found that a brief autism awareness session delivered by employees' usual manager reduced some of the coworkers' concerns about integrating an employee with autism into the workplace. While our study focused on an autism awareness session delivered to co-workers, it was revealed through the interview that management also received autism-related education.

Additional interview findings align with the above-described theoretical perspectives and highlight critical factors for success, including an effective recruitment and onboarding strategy, an inclusive managerial style, an organizational culture that values diversity, and a strong workplace social support system. A smooth onboarding process can significantly enhance the retention rate of employees with autism, and the interview emphasized the value of partnering with specialized job agencies or advocacy organizations to achieve this (Bernick, 2022; Hennekam & Follmer, 2024; Nicholas *et al.*, 2019). These external agencies play a crucial role in diversifying recruitment pools and can provide targeted training for HR professionals and managers to develop more inclusive hiring practices. According to Kulkarni *et al.* (2013), disability training and placement agencies serve four key roles in promoting employment: trainer, partner, facilitator, and marketer. In our study context, the partnering role was most relevant, as the focal company had actively engaged in inclusive employment through initiatives such as job study visits, exposure visits, and on-the-job training.

Workplace social interactions, including structured meetings and informal gatherings, create opportunities for understanding and acceptance and thus play a crucial role in fostering inclusivity. This is recognized by large companies such as IBM, Ernst & Young, Microsoft, and JP Morgan, which implement social activities and regular meetings to help reduce social anxiety among neurodivergent employees (Hennekam & Follmer, 2024). Such regular interactions can also help address the so-called double empathy problem, which posits that mutual misunderstandings between neurodivergent and neurotypical people lead to perceptions that neurodivergent people have social challenges, which has been shown to be an issue in workplace interactions (Szechy *et al.* 2024).

A truly inclusive work environment is built on the foundation of psychological safety (Edmondson, 2018), which is particularly critical for neurodivergent employees. Psychological safety enables employees to express concerns, feel comfortable disclosing differences such as autism, and

actively engage without fear of negative consequences. Fostering allyship is key approach to creating psychologically safe and inclusive workplaces. Many companies have introduced affinity groups or ERGs to support various forms of diversity, including gender (Smith & Johnson, 2020), LGBTQIA+ status, disability, and neurodiversity (Doyle, 2023). As demonstrated in our company's case, both formal and informal allyship initiatives are needed. The implementation of a “buddy system” as part of onboarding can help new hires effectively navigate their work environment while simultaneously providing a layer of social support. As workplace interventions should be embedded in onboarding as well as advancement processes (Maroto & Pettinicchio, 2015), managers or ERG groups could develop tailored mentorship programs to facilitate career advancement and personal development among neurodivergent employees.

With organizations increasingly recognizing neurodivergent people as an untapped employee pool (Austin & Pisano, 2017), yet many managers expressing reluctance to hire neurodivergent job candidates despite positive experiences (Institute of Leadership & Management, 2020; Nicholas *et al.*, 2018), the time for radical changes to perspectives about neurodiversity is now.

By shifting the narrative from disability to capability, businesses can unlock the full potential of neurodivergent employees while promoting a more inclusive workforce. Recognizing and valuing strengths associated with autism or other forms of neurodivergence—including creativity, attention to detail, efficiency, and dedication to their work (Bury *et al.* 2020; Cope and Remington, 2022)—not only benefits employers but also fosters broader societal change, encouraging greater understanding and appreciation of neurodiversity. In doing so, workplaces become not just more diverse, but also more innovative, resilient, and forward thinking.

5.2 Strengths and limitations

The development and evaluation of comprehensive workplace initiatives to foster neurodiversity inclusion warrants interdisciplinary research efforts. Notably, our study reflects cooperation between academics and industry, integrating perspectives from a manager (not the interviewed manager) who worked for the focal company, a researcher focusing on autism, and a researcher with a human resource and EDI background. As noted by Hennekam and Follmer (2024), such collaborations are generally rare. Another strength of this study is the use of a real-world workplace setting in Europe and the use of a multi-actor approach in our study design, resulting in both coworker and managerial perspectives.

The main limitation of our study lies within the small number of surveyed employees and a single interview. Given the limited sample size, determining statistical significance is challenging. Interviews with the employee with autism, coworkers, HR professionals, the company ERG focusing on disability and neurodiversity, or the specialized recruitment firm may have generated additional insights. Future work could organize focus group discussions to integrate viewpoints from various stakeholders. We also note that factors other than the awareness session may have

positively impacted coworkers' perceptions of autism, particularly their experiences working with the new employee with autism, who had been on the job for approximately 6 months at that time. We also do not know if the company had other employees with autism who prefer not to disclose. Regarding educational interventions, future studies should involve employees with autism in the co-design of neurodiversity training and make use of qualitative surveys to gain insights into how such efforts impact their workplace experiences. Further research—including studies on intersectionality—is needed to understand how individual factors, such as gender, age, or educational levels, influence coworkers' attitudes about disability inclusion (Santilli *et al.*, 2023); we were not able to explore such effects in the present study due to the small sample size and limited demographic information. Finally, one of the authors worked for the focal company for several years. Although this author was not present during the autism awareness session, their involvement could have influenced the research outcome (Bourke, 2014) as some colleagues may have modified their answers owing to this relationship. To limit the risk of bias, the collection of data ensured anonymity and confidentiality. Further it was made explicit that the manager is acting as a researcher. The use of a validated questionnaire (Nicholas *et al.*, 2019) allowed to minimize subjective interpretation.

6. CONCLUSION

This study set out to evaluate the ability of a brief autism awareness session to dispel stigma and influence coworkers' perceptions about working with someone with autism. While we found moderate positive effects of the intervention on reducing workplace concerns, education is only one part of the solution to supporting the long-term employment and inclusion of neurodivergent individuals. The inclusion of neurodivergent candidates and employees from the beginning onward is key to achieving successful onboarding and sustainable employment. At the time of the managerial interview, the employee with autism was still working for the focal company.

The study acknowledges its limitations, particularly regarding the feasibility of achieving sustainable and meaningful mentality change through a single brief session. Workplace inclusion is a continuous process that requires sustained efforts. Beyond awareness training, organizations must establish comprehensive support structures that address both systemic and interpersonal factors affecting neurodivergent employees. This includes providing mentorship and accommodation tailored to individual needs and fostering a culture of inclusivity where all employees feel psychologically safe and understood. Managers play a critical role in leading by example, ensuring that inclusive practices are embedded within team dynamics. Ultimately, achieving truly inclusive workplaces requires sustained commitment from all levels of the organization across the employment process. By integrating education with meaningful

organizational actions and cultural shifts, companies can create environments where neurodivergent employees can thrive both personally and professionally.

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