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CASE STUDY

The DXC technology work experience program: disability-inclusive recruitment and selection in action

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Abstract

With the rapid advancement of innovative technology, coupled with IT being a core function in contemporary business, there has been an upward trend of multi-national companies (MNCs) reporting a skill deficit in areas such as data analytics and cybersecurity (Columbus, 2017. IBM predicts demand for data scientists will soar 28% By 2020. *Forbes*; NeSmith, 2018. The cybersecurity gap is an industry crisis. *Forbes*). In a recent survey with over 3,000 CIOs, 65% indicated their organizations were unable to maintain par with the progression of technology in areas such as data analytics and security due to a lack of adequate talent (Harvey Nash & KPMG, 2018. CIO *survey* 2018). Although, organizations have recently started to expand their talent pipeline following a neurological breakthrough: research as well as anecdotal evidence suggests adults with mild forms of autism display above-average intelligence, increased attention focus, and high visual–spatial abilities; a combination in high market demand for roles such as software testing, data analysis, cybersecurity, and engineering due to their uncanny ability with pattern recognition, information processing, analytics, and attention to detail.

These auspicious developments come at the helm of an increasing rate of governments around the world implementing provisions to their labour regulations towards equitable hiring of people with disabilities (Myors et al., 2017. Perspectives from 22 countries on the legal environment for selection. *Handbook of Employee Selection*. 659–677. Research Collection Lee Kong Chian School of Business.). Some, such as France, Japan, Kenya, Korea, and Taiwan, have gone so far as to set quota targets (Myors et al., 2017. Perspectives from 22 countries on the legal environment for selection. *Handbook of Employee Selection*. 659–677. Research Collection Lee Kong Chian School of Business.). The implication for organizations is that they need to develop disability-inclusive recruitment and selection systems along with work designs and environments that are disability friendly. But what does this mean in practice? What does a disability-inclusive recruitment and selection system look like?

Enter DXC Technology (DXC): born out of a merger between global conglomerate Computer Science Corporation and Hewlett Packard Enterprise, generating close to $25 billion annually in revenue, with clients across more than 70 countries, they strategically became a pioneer in the digital transformation that was taking place globally. In the wake of the breakthrough in employment diversity, DXC recognized this as an opportunity to gain a critical edge within the increasingly competitive talent pool market. First, design a program of their own for recruiting and selecting adults with high functioning autism. Next, through a collaboration with various universities including the University of Queensland and Macquarie University, Neurodiversity Hubs were established; an initiative designed to assist neurodivergent students with obtaining work experience and internships. In doing so, they faced the following key challenges: *How could they design a recruitment and selection strategy for neurodivergent individuals that was equitable, ethical, and efficient? In particular, where could they find suitable neurodivergent candidates, what criteria should they use to select them, and how should they handle unsuccessful candidates to ensure beneficial outcomes for all stakeholders?*

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Work experience program

As Julie walked through the door at 8:55 a.m., she felt anxiously optimistic; it was the first day of the work experience program: a 3-week recruitment and selection process for neurodiverse adults from higher education that could demonstrate an aptitude and motivation to perform in IT roles. After recruiting through the Neurodiversity Hub, 14 applicants were expected to attend. Recruiting exclusively through an academic institution, in lieu of a career fair or online job source, was not the traditional practice of any company; however, given the particular characteristics of the targeted candidates, standard recruitment methods did not seem appropriate. Then again, conventional hiring practices catered to neuro-typical adults, not neuro-atypical individuals who displayed neurological differences. For the latter, proverbial candidate assessments, such as verbal interviews and soft skill assessments, would serve more as barriers than a bona fide evaluation system.

What Julie understood about autism was perhaps more hypothetical than factual: heightened neurological sensitivity to lights and sounds, hindrance of social imagination, and societal withdrawal just to name a few. That said, the overarching challenge she faced as the Program Administrator was that not everyone displayed these traits in a ubiquitous manner; some may exhibit difficulty with social interaction whereas others may not. To complicate matters further, Julie could recall instances when an applicant would exhibit only one, or perhaps two, of these characteristics in a manner that was so mild she would not have guessed they were autistic had she met them outside of the program. Needless to say, this made program planning a colossal challenge.

While this was not Julie's first time facilitating the event as the Program Administrator, each event carried a unique set of unforeseen challenges. Just 6 weeks prior, in Alice Springs, an applicant chose not to participate by sitting in the corner, facing the wall, and refusing to speak. Alternatively, 2 weeks later in Canberra, one participant excelled with flying colours: they worked well in groups, socially immersed themselves, and the last that Julie heard, the applicant was being considered for permanent employment with a partner organization. It was a reminder of a key lesson she learned when DXC started the program 2 years prior: no two autistic adults are the same.

Each workshop was structured in a similar format: First, there was a 1-day assessment of the participants followed by a 2½-week selection process. Albeit separate phases, there was a high degree of structural overlap: start by 9:30 a.m. with a light-hearted social interaction, followed by a training seminar centred on software development, then break for lunch, returning to work collaboratively on a project until the daily departure at 4:30 p.m. The 1-day assessment was inherently a high-level evaluation to determine: Was a particular candidate suitable for the entire program? Did they show an initial willingness and desire to immerse themselves in an environment that was irrefutably foreign, with the intent to develop interpersonal and work skills? Sure, this methodical assessment for a paid internship was unequivocally unique, perhaps overly laborious; however, if they were to cater to the strengths of the applicants and present a bona fide career opportunity, traditional hiring methods such as panel interviews, psychological tests, and a litany of hypothetical questions had to be abandoned.

Two colleagues in addition to Julie were involved in the program: Brad and Lisa. Brad's title was Tech Lead, as he specialized in software development training. Lisa was the Autism Support Specialist; her expertise and focus were offering personalized, and collective, emotional support to all of the participants. This combination was standard for conducting the DXC work experience workshops: each person had a singular focus; however, the collective focal point was ensuring the participants were comfortable in their environment and received ample support from the team.

As the candidates arrived, Julie and her colleagues had prepared the room: natural sun light filled the room, the walls were elegantly bare, and there was an absence of music. It was as if

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everything had been stripped bare; all that was left was an elongated board room table, a projector, company hand-outs, and laptops for the participants to work on. It was palatably clear that the space had been intentionally designed using the concept of 'less is more'. Neurological sensitivity to lights and sounds is a common trait amongst autistic individuals; however, the impact it can have, if at all, is principally situational. By creating an environment allowing for ergonomic changes, Julie and her associates could, theoretically, respond to any individual needs of the participants.

As the time neared 9:30 a.m., participants filed into the room one by one. Everyone was very quiet, something Julie was all too familiar with at the start of each workshop. The team anticipated this, conducting an icebreaker to encourage social interaction: two truths and a lie.

Julie started it off: 'I absolutely love coffee, my middle name is Elizabeth, and I grew up on a farm.' A brief pause took place in the room before some of the candidates started chiming in with what they believed was the incorrect fact. 'I don't know…you don't exactly look like an Elizabeth' said one participant; 'you walked in with a coffee this morning, so I'm pretty sure you actually do love coffee' said another while grinning. After a few moments, Julie responded in a cheerful, whimsical tone, 'I do love coffee, and my middle name is Elizabeth, but I definitely did not grow up on a farm. I think they're really cool, but I'm slightly terrified of being around animals that are taller than me!'

From Julie's experience, adding a degree of self-deprecating humour singled humility and acted as social encouragement. But it certainly was unconventional, she thought, recalling her human resource management classes during university that emphasized the importance of establishing credibility in order to solicit the buy-in from job candidates. But with this candidate pool, she knew that emphasising her status in the program would be counterproductive; the effective approach was for her to ensure the participants felt comfortable, not intimidated.

Over the next few minutes, each participant shared interesting characteristics about themselves while others would chime in to guess what the made-up fact was. Some became increasingly social as they spoke: 'Okay, so, I'm really into baking- in fact, my favourite thing to make would have to be different types of cookies. I'm also into traveling: love visiting New Zealand and a couple different spots in Europe. And, I was a huge basketball fan growing up.' Alternatively, the response from others was comparatively minimal: 'I've never been on a plane; my favourite food is sushi; I'm majoring in engineering.'

Occasionally, one of the trainers would interject with a few words of encouragement, such as 'that's wonderful!' or 'that's really exciting!' There was one individual candidate, however, who chose not to speak, rather, they simply pointed to a piece of paper in front of them. Without hesitation, Julie walked over, smiled, and asked if she could read their response aloud; when the applicant nodded her head in agreement, Julie shared it with the rest of the group: 'I've travelled to eleven different countries, I have two dogs, and love to draw.' There was a pause in the room before some of the candidates started guessing what the made up detail was; a couple claimed the travel, whereas others believed it was the dogs. What was most striking about this incident was not the participant's refusal to speak, but Julie's response: her body language and tone were completely natural, as if it was planned all along.

Following the icebreaker, Brad conducted a high-level training exercise in software development. There was minimal social interaction from the group; however, Julie and Lisa continually observed the room to identify any behaviour that could suggest a participant was not keeping up with the demonstration, or was displaying high anxiety. While an individual's ability to keep up with the presentation was not an assessment criterion, observational assessment from the trainers was a primary focus. The reason being that individuals with autism often display comparatively less social interaction than their differing counterparts, and as a result, they are much less likely to verbally interject about not understanding a training seminar or wanting to take a break. By continually observing their behaviour, the team could modify the presentation when necessary to ensure everyone was provided an equal opportunity.

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After a few minutes, Julie felt a tug from Lisa: one candidate was displaying strong, nervous behaviour; he was rubbing his hands together, slowly rocking back and forth in his chair, and refusing to make eye contact during the demonstration. This was, in a way, unforeseen; he participated in the ice breaker earlier that day, and had made some really great verbal contributions. But these are the types of challenges one may face when running a program designed to assess autistic candidates, especially as the workshop facilitators have no prior personal knowledge of the candidates, so cannot anticipate exactly how an individual might respond to a situation or when a facilitator intervenes. Some participants may decline to speak whereas others will engage in verbal communication. Nonetheless, Lisa walked over without hesitation and quietly spoke to the candidate. After a few moments, Lisa was observed leaving the room with the participant following her; Lisa returned minutes later and quietly informed Julie that the applicant had decided to go home.

Following lunch, the participants were split into two groups to work collaboratively on a software development task. The task was to program a robot to give directions to various stores within a mall. They were to use the software that was demonstrated by Brad earlier that day. When providing directions in previous workshops, Julie would spend the majority of the time discussing what the overarching goal was while providing illustrative examples. During the lunch break, however, Julie and the rest of the team collectively decided to try something new. Instead of spending the entire time explaining the technical requirements, she would focus her directions on the collaborative effort: be respectful of each other's ideas, work as a team, and have fun.

There was a noticeable difference in the group's behaviour by the afternoon: a significant increase in social engagement, laughter, and an exchange of ideas that were so creative, even Julie was left stunned. Remarkably, a few participants even took on leadership roles: if they noticed someone was having difficulty with a feature in the software, they voluntarily showed them how to fix it. In the end, each group completed the task efficaciously, but they both also took the task a step further. One group programmed the machine to tell a joke, while the other enabled it to play music in the background. As described by one participant, 'you cannot have a mall without music. So, we added that as well.'

Based on what Julie knew about autism from the literature, autism was classified as a 'disability': a term that implies someone is incapable of completing a task self-sustainably.

Yet, these 13 neuro-atypical adults not only challenged the limitations implied by the term, but also showcased exceptional talent for creativity and leadership. Needless to say, all of this left Julie pondering: given no two autistic adults are the same, what exactly was the cause for the positive program outcome? Was it the open-ended directions that generated this degree of creativity and social interaction? Or, did the preconceived notions regarding autistic people's limitations lead many to prematurely assume what they are capable of achieving? 'And what if…' she thought to herself, '…it's the latter? What does that say about how we recruit, and subsequently manage, individuals with autism?'

At the end of the day, Julie met with the other trainers to prepare for one of the most difficult aspects of the program: determine who would continue with the 2½-week selection process. Using a 1-day recruitment workshop as a preliminary assessment was not conventional practice; rather, traditional methods would be used instead, such as: evaluating their work experience or reviewing their educational qualifications. But they could not employ those methods here because, due to the pervasive stigma existing in most organizations towards people with a disability, the vast majority of applicants never had the opportunity to acquire formal work experience. In fact, more often than not, this program was their first 'job'. Moreover, each participant showed remarkable progress with the software development and proactively working as a team; consequently, using education as an assessment of their capability would be trivial.

Managing this step of the program was far more delicate and potentially consequential than it presented itself to be. Any applicant who was chosen to continue would be part of a diverse talent pool and have an increased likelihood of receiving a job; however, permanent employment was not a guarantee, even if a candidate successfully completed the program.

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The implications of their decision, for both the candidates and DXC, were quite significant. Above all, one thing was certain: whoever did not progress to the next stage could not receive the proverbial, brief e-mail with the automated message indicating they were not selected.

From Julie's experience, applicants generally walk into the program believing they would be denied. Not as a result of poor learning skills, but rather because they had accumulated a lifetime of rejections as a result of being autistic. If a participant was not successful, Julie and the team needed to provide coherent, yet tangible, feedback that would give the applicant something to work with to concrete improve their employability. This was going to be a tough decision. As Julie sat down with Brad and Lisa, they looked at each other in silence; each one knew the difficulty that lies ahead. Each candidate had so much potential. After a few moments, Julie laid the applications on the table, and said 'well, where do we start?'

Discussion questions

What are some of the barriers autistic adults face in gaining employment?

As noted at the beginning of the case, conventional recruitment methods are not designed to be neurodivergent-inclusive as they often use assessments that rely on strong verbal communication skills (e.g., interview) to evaluate job suitability. Additionally, candidates were recruited through local academic institutions who had implemented the Neurodiversity Hub: an initiative designed to assist neurodivergent students with obtaining work experience or an internship. While this is an efficacious avenue for a company to recruit from, the vast majority of autists do not have access to these on-campus organizations or are aware of its existence. Moreover, not all academic institutions have the resources to implementing an on-campus organization that offers employability assistance for individuals with a disability, thereby limiting their capability to develop marketable skills for employment.

Next, the pervasiveness of stigmas towards anyone with a disability can impede on a candidate's ability to be assessed in an equitable manner. As documented with Julie's awareness, heightened neurological sensitivity to lights and sounds, hindrance of social imagination, and societal withdrawal are the most common characteristics associated with autism; however, how these are displayed can change with each person as shown with the students in Alice Springs and Canberra. If an employer or recruiter is not aware of how to identify or associate these neurological traits, a negative inference could be made regarding one's capability.

Annabi and Locke (2018) identify, and define, potential hurdles faced by neurodiverse adults. They also emphasize the vast nature as to how autism can symptomatically manifest. Thus, as illustrated in the DXC case and the article by van den Bosch et al. (in this issue), no two autistic people are the same. Both articles highlight that, in the absence of a neurodiversity-inclusive environment and autism employment program, autistic individuals are likely to conceal or mask their autistic traits during the recruitment and selection process as well as after obtaining employment. This may lead to their premature turnover and most certainly will lead to the underutilization of their strengths.

Remington and Pellicano's (in this issue) study of a work experience program for autistic candidates at Deutsche Bank in the UK identified the key challenges predominately stemmed from environmental or situational factors tapping into participants' auditory sensitivity, social and communication difficulties, or need for support.

Waisman-Nitzan, Gal, and Schreuer (in this issue) highlight employer attitudes as a potential employment barrier. When employers take the view that only people with disabilities have special needs, they are likely to consider hiring anyone classified as disabled as a cost. Waisman-Nitzan, Gal, and Schreuer, however, rightly note that all employees have special needs, and thus making adjustments to the external environment or the manner in which the job is conducted is not exclusive to people with disabilities.

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What does the DXC case illustrate about the recruitment strategies, including sourcing and advertising, that are likely to attract people with disabilities?

Conceptually, this case study provides an introduction as to how underdeveloped recruitment strategies are for disabled individuals (Woodhams & Corby, 2007); further, it demonstrates how an organization cannot use conventional methods towards recruitment (assessment of work experience, interviews, etc.) made evident by DXC recruiting through the interstate universities with the Neurodiversity Hub. That said, establishing the role and requirements of the job are an essential first step (Stone & Williams, 1997; Härtel, Härtel, & Trumble, 2013) to ensure any limitations a person may have, be it neurological or physical, do not impede on the ability to perform the necessary role. From here, companies can partner with organizations (academic, government, and/or other businesses) that have a thorough understanding of characteristics or traits to a disability, thereby enabling them to develop a marketing strategy that can effectively, and respectfully, target their desired audience.

What are the advantages of following a recruitment and selection process that requires job applicants to self-disclose their disabilities? What are the disadvantages?

One disadvantage, of which has been an ongoing debate, is a universally agreed upon definition of 'disability' does not exist (She & Livermore, 2007; Bruyère, 2016); some definitions identify based on medical condition, whereas others focus on limitations or work capabilities (Bruyère, 2016). Furthermore, disclosing a disability puts the prospective employer at an increased risk of a discrimination lawsuit as a result of becoming aware (Von Schrader, Malzer, & Bruyère, 2014). Additionally, most laws centred on disability discrimination require employers to alter workplace accommodations to provide equal employment opportunity; however, employers are often reluctant to do so out of perceptual costs to renovate and maintain (Harlan & Robert, 1998). Consequently, disclosing a disability could perpetuate this stigma and generate increased barriers to employment.

Alternatively, disclosing a disability allows for an employer to ensure appropriate accommodations are in place and to ensure the organization is complying with federal requirements (Von Schrader, Malzer, & Bruyère, 2014). For example, the recruitment workshop was designed to cater to the neurological sensitivity of the participants: there was no music, the décor was minimal, and natural sunlight was used to fill the room. Moreover, because candidates had disclosed their autism, Lisa and Julie spent their time observing the students during the training exercise with Brad to identify any behaviours that could suggest a participant was not keeping up with the presentation, or was displaying high anxiety, allowing them to alter the delivery of the information at their discretion to ensure everyone was given an equitable opportunity.

Additionally, disclosing a disability can mitigate the risk of an employee hiding their disability, potentially improving the social inclusion of the workplace culture (Von Schrader, Malzer, & Bruyère, 2014). Within the case study, a noticeable increase in social engagement took place with the participants by the afternoon, with some taking on leadership roles. While a multitude of factors could have attributed to this, creating an environment where being neurodivergent is a commonality instead of an abnormality might have played a significant role.

What are the ethical implications of recruitment and selection for people with disabilities? How should unsuccessful applicants be handled?

Self-disclosing a disability requires applicants to have confidence that their disability status will not negatively impact their opportunities and treatment in or outside of the program (Stone & Williams, 1997). Successful applicants need to be assured they will be placed in a disability-friendly workplace, where managers and coworkers have accurate knowledge of the disability condition and are trained in supportive communication and behaviour (Stone & Williams, 1997; Fujimoto, Rentschler, Le, Edwards, & Härtel, 2014; Nelissen, Hülsheger, van Ruitenbeek, &

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Zijlstra, 2016). Furthermore, recruitment of adults with a disability has been conceptually treated as a form of charity rather than organizational strategy (Luecking, 2008); as a result, government tax incentives have been offered to organizations to encourage the hiring of disabled individuals (United States Department of Labor, 2018). To avoid the ethical risk of a company treating disability employment as an act of exploitation for monetary incentives, organizations need to make the recruitment and selection process as part of their overall strategy.

Rejecting an applicant is a slippery slope for organizations, especially when a participant has disclosed their disability as it puts the organization at an increased risk of a discrimination lawsuit. Additionally, DXC faced an additional challenge: a job was not guaranteed even if a candidate successfully completed the work experience program.

Nonetheless, managing unsuccessful outcomes is a very regular occurrence within the assessment processes. An important factor in managing the outcomes of success or otherwise is the expectation that you set and maintain with applicants throughout the process and the assistance provided for those that are unsuccessful. Individualized feedback is also an important factor that must indicate how a person may become successful. Terminology that could perceptually be perceived as harsh (e.g., 'rejection') is never used within the program.

What characteristics do staff involved in the recruitment and selection process require to enact a fair and effective program?

Staff need to be open to diversity, empathetic, and flexible to adapt both the environment and process content to fairly accommodate people with disabilities (Härtel & O'Connor, 2015). During the ice breaker, one candidate chose to write down their response; Julie adapted by adjusting her voice, and body language, to compassionately ask the participant if she could read their response aloud. Later, an applicant had displayed nervous behaviour. This was unforeseen as they had been participating and making noticeable verbal contributions. Nonetheless, Lisa quickly adapted by quietly asking the candidate to speak in private, who subsequently decided to leave early. Next, continual observation took place by Lisa and Julie during Brad's training session to modify the delivery of the content. Despite modifications not being necessary, the trainers positioned themselves to cater to the strengths of the participants which ensured everyone had an equitable opportunity to retain the information.

Next, creating an environment that is both healthy and safe to applicants with a disability is essential (Bengisu & Balta, 2011). Research has shown emotional support from peers and supervisors play an integral role in the success of a proposed work task (Kulkarni and Lengnick-Hall, 2011; Hedley et al., 2017; Meacham, Cavanagh, Shaw, & Bartram, 2017), and can serve as an important role in reducing social isolation (Vornholt, Uitdewilligen, & Nijhuis, 2013) for individuals with a disability. As such, organizations and their staff need to facilitate an environment that is both open and supportive of diversity through social responsibility policies, practices, and initiatives (Meacham et al., 2017: 1477). As seen during the ice breaker, Julie used self-deprecating humour to generate social engagement along with the trainers interjecting with phrases of encouragement (e.g., 'that's wonderful!' or 'that's really exciting!'). While comparatively more subtle, this continued later during the group task where the primary focus centred on collaborative engagement instead of technical specifications (e.g., 'be respectful of each other's ideas, work as a team, and have fun.').

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