

Need New Ideas For Your Business? Hire More Autistic Staff!

Ideas are the lifeblood of innovation. Without new ideas, development in all areas stagnates, be it new products, new services, new ways of doing things or new solutions to old problems. The appetite in humanity for the new, for the next big thing is insatiable, hence the frequent long queues outside shops selling the latest model, be it trainers or phones. A business that can keep coming up with new ideas, that can keep one step ahead of the competition, is likely to do well.

So how can a business improve the quantity and quality of the new ideas it brings to market in one form or another? Spending a fortune on research and development is certainly one way, and speaking to customers and potential customers is another. But innovation can also be encouraged by allowing and encouraging diversity of thought in the workplace.

The problem is, many workplaces are designed to be as easy as possible to manage to get the results required from the workforce, and this almost inevitably leads to many employers looking to employ clones, or to turn those they already employ into clones in terms of all complying with some mystical vision of the ideal corporate employee. But those same employers then suddenly want the staff they have been trying to shoehorn into a standard template to be innovative and generate new ideas when required. There is a major contradiction here that frequently goes unidentified. Freedom of thought is not something that can be easily turned on and off. Forcing people to comply with a highly regimented regime, no matter how well intentioned or kindly implemented, in my experience suppresses new thinking. Our brains get used to thinking in certain ways and curbing other activity. You cannot expect people to stay well inside “the box” for most of the time and then to expect them to think “outside the box” effectively from time to time when it suits you and only about problems which are specified by others.

Autistic people are well known to struggle in the workplace, with some estimates putting only around 20% of autistic people in employment at all. My own 30 year career has been no walk in the park as I am in no way suited to being put in any kind of box, being told how to think or what is not up for discussion. In the traditional workplace, where I have always worked, this causes huge problems. I have lost count of the number of times when I have been admonished for not enthusiastically supporting some great new initiative that does not make sense to me and about which no one is willing to answer what I consider perfectly reasonable questions. Too often I have been rebuked for challenging the way things are done when to me there is clearly a far better way.

Watching things go wrong at work for me has always felt like watching a car crash about to happen in slow motion from a position on the front row. Any decent person in that situation would do what they could to avert the imminent accident, and may well afterward be recognised as some kind of hero even though they just did what any good person in that situation would. But when the impending accident is in another context and less clear to others, the intervention of the person that sees it coming is often less welcome.

Of course, we all make mistakes and misread situations – in social settings, many autistic people may be more prone to misreading than average. To return to the analogy of the car crash, a staged incident for a film could be mistaken for reality, or the observer may not fully understand how a particular junction operates. But making mistakes is also the way that we learn. Management of the way new ideas are trialled can be used to reduce the potential damage of a mistake. Where the new ideas challenge traditional or conventional thinking, if the accepted way is properly thought through then surely it should be possible to give convincing responses and explanations to challenges?

Nothing looks worse or will upset employees more than a change or policy implemented without explanation and accompanied by a blank refusal to even try and give proper answers to questions and challenges.

So autistic staff will frequently challenge the accepted norms and way of doing things, and this may be a painful experience for all concerned. The social skills many of us struggle with may make autistic people seem difficult to work with, at least until adaptations on all sides can be worked out. But what autistic staff will give you is a completely new way of thinking and addressing problems.

Autistic brains simply do not shut off. This can be a huge problem for many of us, particularly at 2 in the morning, but it has huge potential benefits for businesses of all kinds. I cannot tell you how many times a potential solution to a problem at work has come to me in the middle of the night or in the shower when I was not even consciously thinking about the issue. Now I know that this happens to us all from time to time – autistic people certainly do not have any kind of monopoly on innovation and ideas. But synapses in the brains of autistic babies have been shown to fire more than in comparable brains of non-autistic children. This in no way means that we are any more intelligent or better than anybody else and I would never claim anything of the kind. But it does mean that autistic people can frequently generate ideas and potential solutions at an accelerated rate.

Surely it is self-evident that the more ideas and thoughts you have, the better chance there is that one of them is a big step forward or a breakthrough? Why else would businesses spend a fortune on focus groups and brainstorming?

Of course, hiring autistic staff does not guarantee anything any more than hiring anyone to work for you does. All autistic people are unique and different, though many share similar traits.

The great shame is that the perceived lack of social and interview skills and unconventionality of many autistic people puts employers off for hiring what could be prized assets in creative and problem solving roles. We just need a little help in what seem to many to be the “easier” parts of the job like meetings and dealing with other people! The trouble is, the awkwardness and social difficulties are much easier to see in a 30 minute interview than the abundance of ideas that this candidate could bring to your company.

Just as we are now moving to a world where many of us work hard to see past physical disabilities as our first and lasting impression of a person, so we also need to look to the benefits of wider diversity of thought, where autistic people have a huge amount to offer.

None of us is the complete package – that simply does not exist. But we can and all should be encouraged to use our strengths for the benefit of all while being supported by others in our weaker areas. Autistic people deserve that chance just as much as anyone else and have so much to offer that is being missed at present.