

ANZSOG CASE PROGRAM – TEACHING NOTE

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The APS Neurodiversity Community of Practice: Addressing psychological and psychosocial safety at work in the APS

An ANZSOG Teaching Note Case by Dr Julia Richardson, ANZSOG

Keywords: Neurodiversity, advocacy, leadership, intersectionality, Community of Practice, psychosocial safety, psychological safety, diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, Australian Public Service (APS), workplace health and safety

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Summary

This case explores the important role played by the Australian Public Sector (APS) Neurodiversity Community of Practice in supporting a diverse, safe and inclusive workplaces. It looks at neurodiversity in the Australian Public Sector (APS) and the development, formation and ongoing work of the Neurodiversity Community of Practice.

In 2022, Andrew Pfeiffer PSM and Robin Edmonds PSM came together to create the Public Sector Neurodiversity Community of Practice (CoP). Despite growing recognition of the importance of inclusivity and psychosocial safety, there remain considerable challenges in adequately supporting neurodivergent employees across the public sector. This gap affects not only individual well-being and psychosocial safety more broadly, but further hinders productivity, innovation, and overall workplace performance.

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These lessons focus on the intersection of neurodiversity and psychosocial wellbeing in the workplace, highlighting understanding neurodiversity and leading neurodiverse teams. Each topic includes further learning materials. Instructors should consider the best way to direct pre-reading and allocate sufficient class time.

Learning Objectives

- Understand the concept of neurodiversity, intersectionality and common neurotypes
- Understand the regulatory context and the responsibilities managers have for ensuring safe workplaces for neurodivergent employees
- Engage with the lived experience of neurodivergence
- Understand how communities of practice are established and what their role is in supporting a diverse workforce
- Understand and identify best practices for supporting neurodivergent employees, with a focus on fostering an inclusive culture.

Course Audience

This case study offers insights into the dynamics of neurodiversity, psychosocial safety, and employee wellbeing in public sector environments. It will be useful for senior executives, people leaders, HR practitioners, and operational managers striving to cultivate inclusive, psychologically secure, and high-performing workplaces. Importantly, it also highlights the integral role of communities of practice in driving cultural change, providing a platform for shared learning, peer support, and the co-design of inclusive strategies that embed these principles into everyday operations.

Suggested Teaching Approaches

1.	Resources and questions for whole of class discussion (60 Minutes)	Understanding Neurodiversity To address neurodiversity in the work place it is important to develop an understanding of common neurotypes, along with their strengths and weaknesses, as a powerful first step in building inclusive workplaces. In this context intersectionality is an important concept to understand how overlapping identities can create distinct personal experiences. The term neurodiversity was coined by Australian sociologist Judy Singer in the late 1990s. Singer introduced the concept as part of her work advocating for the acceptance and recognition of neurological differences as part of human diversity, much like cultural or ethnic diversity. Her work has been influential in shifting the view of conditions such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia from being seen solely as medical disorders to being recognized as natural variations in cognitive functioning. The following resources will help students develop an understanding of neurodiversity, how to talk about it and address some common misconceptions. What is neurodiversity? - Harvard Health A strengths-based approach to autism - Harvard Health Neurodiversity: What Language Do I Use? » MiTraining Breaking Down Barriers: Addressing Misconceptions About Neurodiversity — Monarch Behavioral Health, PLLC Exploring Neurodiversity through an intersectional lens John Innes Centre Questions and prompts for discussion: a) Neurodivergence and variation in brain function – discuss some of the common neurotypes, including common strengths and weaknesses.
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		b) What are some common misconceptions about neurodivergent individuals, and how can they be addressed? c) How does the concept of neurodiversity fit with your understanding of diversity and inclusion? d) How can the concept of intersectionality be applied to an understanding of neurodiversity? How can this help us to further understand individual experiences and challenges? e) Why is the language we use to discuss neurodiversity important? In what ways could you or have you used or encountered inclusive language concerning neurodiversity? f) How can an increased understanding of neurodiversity help us interact more effectively with neurodivergent individuals in daily life (e.g., at work, school, or in social settings)?
2.	Further information and questions for class discussion (60 minutes). Potential assignment or project work.	Understanding Neurodiversity in the workforce, regulatory context and legislated responsibilities One of the main gaps highlighted in the case study is the lack of clarity regarding employers' responsibilities to support neurodivergent staff within the APS regulatory framework. Below are links to the relevant documents that protect the rights of neurodivergent employees. Students should familiarise themselves with the legislation. • Disability Discrimination Act 1992 (DDA). This national law prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability, which includes neurodivergence, ensuring equal treatment in hiring, work conditions, and career progression. Federal Register of Legislation - Disability Discrimination Act 1992 • Fair Work Act 2009. Offers broader protections against unfair treatment at work, including unfair dismissal or discrimination based on characteristics like disability: Federal Register of Legislation - Fair Work Act 2009 • Model Workplace, Health and Safety Act. The Model Work Health and Safety Act requires employers to ensure the health and safety of neurodivergent employees by providing reasonable adjustments, managing risks, and promoting psychological well-being: Model Work Health and Safety Act Safe Work Australia • Fair Work Ombudsman: The fair work ombudsman provides an outline of key workplace rights and entitlements for employees with a disability: Employees with disability - Fair Work Ombudsman • APSC Reasonable Adjustment Policy: The APSC reasonable adjustment policy outlines some of the requests that can be made to working arrangements for staff: APSC reasonable adjustment policy Australian Public Service Commission After students are familiar with the regulatory context, rights and responsibilities the following questions can be used to develop a further understanding of what this means in practice: a) What is the purpose of the Disability Discrimination Act (1992) and the Fair Work Act (2009) in relation to neurodivergent employees in the workplace? b) What workplace diversity strategies are in place in the APS to promote the inclusion of neurodivergent individuals? c) What steps could a neurodivergent employee take if they feel they are being discriminated against in the APS? d) How would an APS employer determine whether a requested adjustment is "reasonable" for a neurodivergent employee? e) What accommodations or adjustments could make workplaces more inclusive for neurodivergent employees?
3.	Resources and questions for self-directed study and reflection (60-90 minutes)	Lived experience of neurodivergent employees and supporting Neurodiverse employees. Learning from the lived experience of neurodivergent employees is essential because it provides valuable insights into their unique challenges and strengths, enabling employers to create more inclusive, supportive workplaces that foster productivity, innovation, and well-being. Lived Experience – hear from Orion Kelly, Andrew Pfeiffer and Jess McCabe as they discuss their experience of neurodivergence in the workplace: Orion Kelly (2020): How To Improve The Workplace For AUTISTIC People Andrew Pfeiffer (2022): Andrew Pfeiffer: Neurodiversity: the untapped competitive advantage TED Talk

		Jess McCabe: Failing at Normal: An ADHD Success story (2017): https://youtu.be/JiwZQNYIGQI?si=OE2i6BewkG_14AgG Reflection: After listening to some of the lived experience shared above students should spend some time reflecting on what they learned and how the stories shared expanded their understanding of neurodivergence in the workplace. Further questions for reflection: a) What kinds of challenges might neurodivergent employees face in traditional work environments? b) How can workplace structures (e.g., rigid schedules, open-office layouts) create barriers for neurodivergent individuals? c) Can you think of examples where neurodivergent employees might be misunderstood by colleagues or managers? How can this be addressed? d) How might neurodivergent employees face unique challenges in career development or promotion opportunities?
4.	Questions for small group discussion and reflection (60 minutes)	Setting up a community of practice One of the points identified in the case study is around the burden of advocacy and awareness raising being placed on the shoulders of neurodivergent employees, who are often already struggling in the workplace. The purpose of this lesson is to reflect on advocacy and explore how to share the mental load of promoting inclusion for neurodivergent individuals. The goal is to develop ideas for equitable involvement in advocacy efforts and examine the importance of allyship in this process. The CoP has worked to bring together advocates from across public sector agencies in order to share the load, reduce duplication of effort and raise awareness. CoP, along with other diversity and inclusion networks, and are one way in which the APSC is seeking the strengthen cross-agency connection. This lesson includes further information about diversity and inclusion networks in Australia and abroad and asks students to think about what goes into setting up these networks and communities. APSC Diversity and Inclusion Networks (2023): Diversity and inclusion networks Australian Public Service Commission (apsc.gov.au) APSC State of the Service Report (2023): State of the Service Report 2022–23 (apsc.gov.au) There are some international examples where the Community of Practice model has been adopted: International Communities of Practice UK: Neurodiversity Community of Practice - ALDinHE New Zealand: Neurodiversity@Work Community of Practice Update - NZ Disability Employers' Network Creating a community of Practice: How to create and manage a community of practice or peer network – The Social Change Agency 3 tips for community decision making from power to change – The Social Change Agency Questions for small group discussion, thinking about the work done by communities of practice and how they may support, impact or intersect with their own work/workplaces: a) In what situations are CoPs beneficial and what kind of authorising environment do they need?

		b) How can CoPs bridge silos within the public sector to create more collaborative work environments? c) What roles do leadership and facilitation play in maintaining effective CoPs? d) How can CoPs contribute to a shared sense of identity and purpose? e) Looking back at the case study, how does the CoP work to develop a more inclusive APS? Discussion on mental load and advocacy: a) In what ways does workplace culture impact how neurodivergent employees are perceived and supported? b) What does it mean to carry the mental load when advocating for something? c) Give examples of how marginalised individuals may be expected to do most of the advocacy for their inclusion. d) Who often advocates for neurodivergent people? How might neurodivergent individuals feel about constantly advocating for themselves?
5.	Resources and questions for whole of class discussion (60-90 minutes)	Leading a Neurodiverse workforce This section looks at the skills, capabilities and experience needed to lead diverse teams effectively, with an emphasis on understand neurodivergence. Listen to the IPAA's Work with Purpose podcase – interview with Andrew Pfeffer, Robin Edmonds and Lee Steel. In the podcast they discuss they discuss what public sector workplaces could look like in 2028 and how to better support neurodivergent individuals: Listen: Revisiting 'Embracing neurodiversity in the public sector' - Institute of Public Administration Australia (ACT) Limited Institute of Public Administration Australia (ACT) Limited (ipaa.org.au) In the following short article the authors discuss universally accessible design that would benefit both neurotypical and neurodiverse employees: Read: Beyond the business case: Universally designing the workplace for neurodiversity and inclusion (diversityatlas.io) The Neurodiversity Community of Practice - Six ways to support neurodivergent staff Australian Public Service Commission (apsc.gov.au) Key principles for creating a neuroinclusive workplace: Neuroinclusion at work CIPD Discussion questions to prompt further thinking and reflection on how to lead in the context of neurodiversity: a) Why is it important for managers and colleagues to be aware of neurodiversity in the workplace? b) How can organisations encourage a culture that supports and values neurodivergent employees? c) What role do workplace policies play in supporting neurodivergent employees? d) How can workplaces balance providing accommodations while ensuring all employees are treated fairly and equitably? Group brainstorm: a) What kind of capabilities do you think would be important for managers who are leading diverse teams? b) What support and training do managers need to support neurodivergent employees?

Further Resources

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