

Webinar: Nurturing neurodiversity in the workplace



Kate Went 00:05

Hello, and welcome. Thank you for joining us for another one of our Q&A sessions on nurturing neurodiversity in the workplace. It's time to think differently about how we think. Greater understanding about neurodiversity can help us collaborate, communicate, and understand our own needs in the workplace. But there's still lots to do. Increasing awareness, advocating for neurodivergent people, as well as enabling teams to support each other, are all pieces of this puzzle. So, where do we start? My name is Kate Went, I'm Marketing Manager at employee engagement consultancy scarlettabbott. I'm joined for this session today by my colleague, senior editorial consultant Elle Bradley Cox, and Director of Client Experience and DE&I champion Russ Norton. We are happy to be joined today by Jasmine Vihria, behavioural and data scientist from the London School of Economics and Grace Bolton and Mary Buxton. Grace Bolton is a manager in agile and product management within EY's business consulting service line, and co-leads EY's neurodiversity community. And Mary Buxton is a senior manager in Risk Advisory, also within EY's business consulting serving line. Mary's co-chair of EY's ability network, which the neurodiversity community sits under. I'm really, really pleased to have you all with me today for this session. We had a little pre-catch-up on this before, and it was right in the middle of neurodiversity celebration week, so loads of stuff going on, loads of things to talk about. How much we will manage to cram into this session, I'm not sure, but we will try and cover: how to start the conversation about neurodiversity in your organisation, practical support, and adjustments that neurodivergent people need, and the importance of intersectionality and the overlaps with mental health and belonging. We'd love your questions throughout the session. So do feel free to use that chat function to send us questions. Let us know what you're doing in your organisation, thoughts and experiences are all welcome so do send them through, we'd love to hear it. But I'd really love to kick off by asking Grace and Mary, could you tell us a bit about the work that you're involved in at EY and why you chose to get involved? Grace? Can I start with you?

Grace Bolton 02:27

Of course. So yeah, thank you very much for having me and us on today's session. So, I got involved with what was EY's dyslexia and dyspraxia community when I joined EY as a graduate. And the reason I got involved is that I am proudly dyslexic myself. I had my diagnosis given during my A levels. So, at that point, I'd actually navigated education to a certain extent, and developed coping mechanisms without really understanding what I was really good at, my strengths and my struggles. But then the diagnosis helped me to understand that traits profile a bit

better, and really realise my full potential in an academic setting. When I left uni, and then joined EY, I was like, "I don't know what this means to the workplace yet, but I'd probably need to find out because then actually, hopefully, it'll help me navigate my career". The statistics are coming out. It's still a bit of an estimate but one in five are neurodiverse. And then actually, neurodiversity is everyone. So actually, then I was like "so we need to do a bit more about this. Let's start thinking about it". So, I joined the dyslexia and dyspraxia community and then came on as a co-lead. And part of my push to get involved was I was taking some professional qualification exams. So, selfishly, I wanted my extra time, because I knew that was how I could navigate the exams. But as I was going through that, and understanding myself in the working environment, it became clear where my strengths can be used, but also that it's okay to have struggles. Then we took the decision in the summer to rename our dyslexia and dyspraxia community a neurodiversity community, merged with what was our autism community. So, I now co-lead that with another colleague which is probably a good segue to Mary because she has the pre-dyslexia and dyspraxia community story, and how it all fits.

Mary Buxton 05:14

Thank you, guys. Okay, how do you start the conversation? I think it's fine for people who would describe themselves as neurodivergent. I'd say, get comfortable with some of the language that you use in order to have those conversations. I'm not comfortable with "neurodivergent" and "neurodiversity". They don't feel quite right for me, but these languages evolve. I think the more we talk about this, the more we'll find better words to talk about it. So, find those people who are dyslexic, who are ADHD, and they will be in your organisation. Then create an environment where they're comfortable to say, "Yeah, that's me. That's what I am". Grace very politely alluded to the fact that I've been around a bit longer and I'm a bit older than she is. When I came to what was our dyslexia community, and it really wasn't so many years ago, I remember talking to the then leader of the community. Our goal was to make it okay to say that you were dyslexic in our business, because what we'd seen was that people came to our community when they were at a point of crisis, because the situation they were in, hadn't meant that it was, they'd reached a position where the risk of disclosure was not as threatening as the situation that they were finding themselves in. Now, Grace has done a fantastic amount of work to create an environment where now people say, "yeah, I'm ADHD" or "I'm dyslexic", and that's okay. But it's not simple, it takes a while to get there.

Mary Buxton 07:02

It's so interesting. I was having a conversation with somebody yesterday, who's only recently been diagnosed as ADHD. She's freelance and she's a supplier. She basically said, "I would not tell people that I'm ADHD because I would not want to lose work". I feel like, "Blimey!" In your business, do you ever get suppliers coming to you and talking to you and saying, "is EY a place where I can work and be honest and work for you?" I think that's the difference between the corporate world, and the people who want to work with you. We're a supplier of yours and I know from working with you that you're an incredibly inclusive and welcoming bunch. But I do think that sometimes the corporate world can scare off people and people are more, "I don't know, if it's quite professional for me to say this."

Grace Bolton 07:55

What we've been trying to do is break down the stigma and shift the needle on this whole agenda. I think very much, whether it's our conversation today or other conversations, we don't have all the answers. But we're all

on a journey, and everyone is going to be on a different journey with neurodiversity. Whether you're just understanding it as yourself, you're understanding it as an ally, you're thinking "what does it mean for my team? What does it mean for my clients? What does it mean for society?" Everyone is going to be at a different point. So, it's okay to be at different points. It's okay not to have the language quite right. I think about different movements and areas that we've discussed before. I love Mary's analogy that I'm going to steal. Where we've come with mental health, in the last 20-30 years. 20, 30 years ago there was not this mental health, mental wellbeing lexicon, and ability to talk about it openly and actually understand that everyone has "mental health", and everyone needs to look after it. It goes up and down. It fluctuates. I think it's very similar with neurodiversity. Yes, society has given us labels and diagnoses because we need to explain something in some way. But actually, if we're looking at understanding everyone, as individual people, it's a lot more powerful. Just like we know what an extrovert is, and we know what an introvert is. But that's two boxes, and no-one just sits in one box. And within the box, there's so many different permutations. So, again, there's no two Dyslexic individuals that are the same. No two ADHDers – which was another phrase I learned over the last few weeks – are the same. You've got co-occurrences. Then you've got people that will never get a diagnosis, but they just identify with some traits. So I think the spectrum labels sometimes are useful and they're really powerful for some individuals, because it makes them feel like they can identify themselves. But as it evolves, we're going to see it change. It's okay that it changes because we're going to be pushing that change.

Russ Norton 10:42

Lo and behold, Grace, you've just explained sexuality. You've just explained gender. You've just explained everything in this world of diversity and inclusion, where there is no binary. We attach these labels to groups of characteristics, and we get really attached to them as a society and as a culture. But our understanding of them is constantly evolving. To me, what's most exciting is when the understanding of a topic like neurodiversity can then help you have this "aha moment" of "Oh, that's what the whole "gender thing" is about." And that way, if we can invite more people into the conversation, via this, "I can relate to that" way, that, to me, is exciting.

Grace Bolton 11:21

Yes, I completely agree. I guess the one thing with neurodiversity that's interesting, or probably a bit harder to get your head around is that it's invisible. So, gender and race and ethnicity - sometimes people say, "I get it, because I can see it", or it's more acceptable, because I can kind of see it. But there's a whole plethora of things that it's okay to just try. We'll get there.

Elle Bradley-Cox 11:56

Talking about visible and invisible characteristics. How exhausting is it when you have to hide and can't be open? Jasmine? I'd love to hear your take on that.

Jasmine Virhia 12:05

Yeah, sure. So, I'll just do a quick introduction. I'm Jasmine Virhia. I'm an academic based out of the inclusion initiative at the London School of Economics. And essentially, we are a group of scientists. My background is in cognitive neuroscience. So, I've always been interested in the brain and behaviour. I also work with organisational psychologists and economists as well. And we leverage behavioural science insights to provide actionable solutions based on academic research. We're focused on diversity and inclusion. One thing that I had

noticed, from my academic background, is that neurodiversity isn't being prioritised as much. In terms of starting the conversation, this is something that I'm sort of focusing on at the inclusion initiative now. I spoke to Russ previously about a piece that I've just written, based on changes that can be made in terms of your application, your interview and your hiring. Reconceptualising your hiring processes. I feel like this is partly where the conversation will start, because there needs to be an acknowledgement that what Grace touched on, people don't process information in the same way. They will express themselves in different ways. Their comfort and abilities with communicativeness are all different as well. Language is one of the main things that I focused on because it forms the narrative and our attitudes towards minoritized people, whichever group they may be. I think that's one thing talent management and HR professionals really need to focus on. Myself and some of my other colleagues have written language statements that should be used. And to note that neurodiversity isn't something that should be described as something people are "afflicted" with, or that they "suffer from". Their norms are different to your norms, but if they have been someone's norms about the entirety of their life, they wouldn't describe themselves as suffering. I'll send some links that perhaps can be sent out with the recording. But generally taking away the thinking that neurodiversity is something that needs to be cured. There's various aspects of the medical model and the language that comes with how we talk about ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia and that we need to do things, so people are not like this anymore, whether it's medication, whether it's behavioural interventions, but, it's so related to people's wellbeing and doing what they are comfortable with. The fact that other people recognise that and it's so important when it comes to the workplace because I think talent is often defined far too narrowly. Descriptions of talent, especially in application and interview processes, you'll often get the list with "desirable characteristics" and "essential characteristics", but they're so tailored to social aspects. Sometimes actually putting in details about tasks that people would be required to do, who they're going to be working with, and the frequency of how they're going to be working with these people as well. I think that will start to get firms attracting different types of talent, because neurodiversity isn't a sense, and Mary, you touched on "disclosure", but some people in the space even argue now that disclosure shouldn't be used as a word itself. I shouldn't have to disclose this information. This is just part of who I am. There shouldn't be any penalization. This whole thing shouldn't be made more difficult. They were a few thoughts. I can carry on and talk about interviews at this stage, but I'm happy for us to go to other questions.

Kate Went 16:09

It's fascinating. That's such a good point. In the entire employee lifecycle, the very first interactions that you have with an organisation set the tone for the potential relationship you will go on to have with that organisation. So, getting it right, right at the start, in the language that you use and the messaging that you're putting out to potential candidates is so important. I think that's such a good point to make sure that you're involving your talent team and your HR team, and your comms team and your external comms team and everyone throughout the process to make it consistent and gives the best messaging to all potential candidates. Russ, I'd really like to ask you about intersectionality and how that shows up. When it comes to neurodiversity, such as issues of later diagnosis in women and misdiagnosis and stigma involving people of colour. What are your thoughts on this, Russ?

Russ Norton 17:12

For anyone getting up to speed with the jargon, intersectionality basically means that none of us are defined by a single characteristic only. When you have multiple characteristics that don't fit, the majority are more likely to

be negatively impacted by them. A lot of the kind of discourse and all the talk about neurodiversity is that so much of the research in the studies, and Jasmine, I'd fascinated to your opinion on this, has been on the neurodiversity of the straight white male majority, and therefore there has been later diagnosis in women, there has been misdiagnosis altogether in people of colour. So, our understanding has reached a certain level, but that certain level is only applicable to the straight white male majority that currently runs large organisations. So, as we're looking for how we accommodate or how we include and involve as many people as possible, I think it's important to keep questioning the system. And Jasmine, you mentioned about how job interviews will tell you that you need to be confident and decisive and bold, and all these words that kind of tick that archetype. It might massively put someone who considers themselves to not fit those characteristics off, even though their talents and their attributes and their experience is really, valuable for that organisation. Richard Branson is a classic example. He's always held as the modicum of a dyslexic man at the top of an organisation, and "Isn't he wonderful?" But if he was a woman, or if he was a person of colour, would he have been able to achieve that success? Perhaps not. So, I think these are the questions that we need to ask and really start challenging ourselves on is, what is the norm that we expect? And how willing are we to alter that norm and describe it in a way that's much more inclusive.

Mary Buxton 19:10

I could not agree with you more, Russ and just as I reflect on some of my experiences through work, both the good and the bad, and think about the spiky profile that's so often attributed to those who are neurodivergent, those peaks and troughs in skills and talent. I think about how they manifest themselves in terms of what I do and how I work. Then I sort of layer on top of that the fact that I'm female and the fact that I'm from a slightly different cultural background to many of my colleagues and the fact that I'm a part-time mum as well. I'm dyslexic and context is super important to me. I'll often find that I will look at things from quite a different perspective. I've often found that it might mean that I ask a slightly different question when we're talking about something. It might come across as quite an awkward question because it's just not the way that others have looked at it. So, it's like "well, that's great, but have you thought about this?" I do sometimes wonder, particularly when I was more junior, should I have said that? I'm the junior female in the room. I've turned this whole thing upside down and I've looked at it from a completely different perspective. Perhaps that wasn't the right thing to do.

Elle Bradley-Cox 20:41

I feel like any employer should look to that and go, "What a strength or an asset that she can make us think so differently."

Kate Went 21:05

Mary, what you raised there about feeling unsure about being able to ask those questions and coming at something from a different viewpoint - to be able to do that and to speak up requires a certain level of psychological safety in the workplace. That takes a lot of work, digging into your own culture in the workplace to understand, "do we have the kind of environment where people do feel safe to speak up about things and to challenge, particularly at a junior level?" That's quite a big consideration, isn't it, to build in psychological safety as a priority for this kind of work.

Mary Buxton 21:44

Psychological safety is something we're talking more and more about. It's a thread that runs through all these D&I issues in the network and really starting to understand topics that might seem quite different. We all find common ground when we start talking about psychological safety and how you create that environment where there is psychological safety. I think neurodiversity is so important, because, going back to the peaks and troughs, people who are neurodivergent, there will be areas that we struggle with. That's different for everybody. Everybody's individual, but that's kind of what neurodiversity is in my mind. You need that space where you can make mistakes, or you can ask questions, or you can say, "I'm not the best person to do that". I think that does require an environment where people do feel psychologically safe.

Grace Bolton 22:42

Yeah, absolutely. That's one of the key themes that we had coming out of neurodiversity celebration week, last week at EY. We ran a whole host of events to engage, educate, and hear about or hear from our business, but also captured the voice of our business. What we really pivoted to is strengths-based teaming, resourcing and approach. Because then it comes from a place of neurodiversity, but it's applicable for everyone. If we create an environment where everyone understands their strengths and how they can be used - because you can understand your strengths, but you might not know how to use them - then, actually, what that means in a team environment is we're starting to resource and think about building balanced teams. An individual doesn't need to be balanced and that's the spiky profile. The team you build should be, or that's what you should aim for as a high performing team. If you're saying, "we were only really interested in your strengths, because we know no one is Superman or Superwoman", then yeah, of course, every so often, you're going to get in certain situations, as with life, where you're not good at it, and you've got to do it, and you've got to grin and bear it, but that should almost be the anomaly going forwards. There are enough people within organisations, obviously, the bigger the organisation, the easier it is, to find someone else to do it. Like Mary said, make it okay, from a foundation of trust, to say, "I'm flagging that I'm not the best person to do this". And "I'm flagging it from a place where I'm lazy or I don't want to do it. It's just not in the best interest of me, the team, the firm, society and any or all of those boxes. For me to do this, which is something that doesn't come easy." Some people could say you're just trying to get out of something, but I think, there's a lot of positives to it.

Jasmine Virhia 25:17

In terms of intersectionality, and off the back of that, with forming new teams or new starters, a lot of neurodiverse people, if they have been diagnosed later in life – and I have a lot of academic colleagues that have had diagnoses in late 20s, early 30s – is that they won't necessarily have all the solutions that an employer may want from them. Or, when you're building these teams, if you're asking, "Okay, so how can we help?" It's very difficult to be in that situation and think, "okay, here are some actionable solutions for you". When we talk about racial discrimination, or homophobia, it shouldn't be on the minoritized group to consistently come up with all the solutions. They need an environment where there should be support for them. This dialogue can happen. So, I think it's great that teams are building like that.

Russ Norton 26:18

It's almost like the positive discrimination, the "oh, we need more neurodiverse people, because we've heard they're super good at spreadsheets" and some of these wild stereotypes. Are you starting to see the balance flip of it being a perceived negative to now almost being a perceived positive?

Mary Buxton 26:45

So, I mentioned that it was a few years ago we just wanted to address that stigma, get people comfortable. And we did go quite heavy on the "what are the strengths and superpowers?" That sort of swung the pendulum a bit too far the other way. The world is not black and white in that way. There are wonderful shades of grey and we're all different. I think back to Grace's point. We're on this journey and we're finding our way. But absolutely, I think whenever you have these labels, you end up with sweeping assumptions and generalisations.

Grace Bolton 27:30

I completely agree. And Jasmine, what you mentioned was really, interesting for two accounts. The late diagnosis – we see a lot of people in our business, mid 20s or early 30s, or once they start having children. Neurodiversity is genetic, love it or hate it. For some people, maybe their child is facing struggles a bit earlier in life than they did. So, they've gone through this whole journey with their child, and then they've understood more, because previously in society, we just weren't as aware, and we didn't understand it as much. Then they kind of reflect on their own career and their own traits that think "Oh!" Some of them may go straight through for a diagnosis. Others may just be like, "wow, I've I now just understand myself more, but I don't need a diagnosis. I don't need a label." That's completely personal. But again, that's why going back to understanding your traits is helpful. The second thing you said about adjustments – I quite like the phrase is, "I don't know what I don't know". Sometimes, yes, an open question is helpful, because you're just trying to say the sky is your limit, but then actually, that can be quite overwhelming. What we've started to do is build up a bit of a menu of things. We're learning from our people. We're learning what has worked and what hasn't worked. You've come to our community because you want to make sure that you're not weighed down or held back by your struggles, or you need help and support. Here's some tools and here's what different people within our business have used or how they have adapted this starter for 10. You don't always have to pick off the menu, but the menu helps you decide and get those choices. It's something that we're only starting to do now. That's where our journey has led us. Whatever point in your career you're joining the business or on your journey, whether you're a graduate or you're an experienced hire, or you've been in the business quite a long time. Maybe you are a parent, maybe you're not. I think those things will hopefully help to support, but then also leverage the strengths and the diversity of thought,

Elle Bradley-Cox 30:30

To ask a question on that, Grace, because I think it's brilliant that you're doing some practical adjustments for people. I was interviewing somebody recently who was talking about her son who'd been diagnosed with autism. She was saying the problem is that people have got this like, "ah, bless him." kind of attitude. And she was quite frustrated by that as a mum because he's brilliant. She wants the world to be more like Lucas, that's what she said to me, because he has such a kind view of the world. In some of the classroom exercises that he was doing, he was the child asking the interesting questions that nobody else did. Then she said, "I call it like a sympathy thing, and it really, really frustrates me." I guess what I'm trying to get to is, how do we help people

not think that this is something to feel sorry for people for and those sorts of adjustments in your workplace population?

Mary Buxton 31:47

Grace, I just really think what you say about "what's good for dyslexics is good for everybody." There's a bit of a double-edged sword, isn't there? Because we've got more confident to say we're dyslexic or we're ADHD. But when we use that angle, that might mean something to us, but the people who are hearing it have preconceived ideas. It may well trigger any number of responses. You get to that simple point of "will it be perceived as an excuse for not for not doing any something?" I do think there is something in what Grace always talks about "what's good for Dyslexics is good for everybody." She put it in a specific context, for example, a communication or a process. Those who identify as being part of the neurodivergent community, often, if they can navigate that, if they can make sense of it, they're brilliant testcase. They're the canaries in the cage. I struggle with our internal processes. No-one's going to say they're good. I don't struggle with some of the well-known shopping websites, shall we say, I find them very easy to navigate, as opposed to our internal ones, which are probably not so well designed. But then I've never heard anyone in our business going, "Oh, I love our processes, they're brilliant." I just probably feel the pain of them a bit more. How did I draw the connection from your question? I guess it's that idea of, if we get the things right, we don't need to start to be differentiating between different communities and we don't need to be using these labels. We probably need to go through a cycle of using the labels, but hopefully, we'll get to a point where they fall away. And then we just create that environment and those systems and structures where we can all work effectively and be on a level footing.

Kate Went 34:03

I'm conscious of time and we've got some great questions that have come in. So, I'd really like to dive into some of those and see if we can answer a few. I've got a question from Courtney. "My company is developing a new internal communication system. What should we consider making our new system meaningful for those experiencing, for lack of a better word, neurodiversity?"

Grace Bolton 34:35

Use your people and learn from your people. Make it a space, create an environment where it's okay to have the conversation. Then, through the conversation, what better way to design processes and systems than having live real-time input from people who navigate them in a certain way. I think one misconception is that two neurodiverse individuals are the same, or two dyslexics are the same. They're not. You must factor that in because it's not black and white. But I think you can't really do anything without hearing from those that would identify as neurodiverse. A phrase that I also heard over the course of neurodiversity celebration week is "nothing about us without us". It's very much like, engage your people and learn from your people. And it's okay to get it wrong and it's okay not to have all the answers.

Russ Norton 36:01

It reminds me of the YouTube example where, a couple years ago, YouTube updated the app and they spent loads of money and time on it. They released out into the world, and they hadn't tested it with any left-handed people. So, anyone who was left-handed, put the video on full screen and it was upside down. It's just stuff like

that, that reminds you that user testing is so essential. So, it's not just the neurodiverse people, it's everyone. The broader a net you can cast, the more robust it will be.

Kate Went 36:34

Absolutely loved that, particularly as a left-hander! James is asking an interesting question. "Do you think it's possible to create a workplace that enables neurodiverse people to thrive without the complete leadership team believing in and understanding the issue? And do you think enough is being done to target business leaders and develop managers?"

Russ Norton 36:57

I mean, the answer to that question is no, but go on Jasmine, please.

Mary Buxton 37:01

You say no to the first part of the question? Do you not think that perhaps if it's a space where experiences don't always translate and there will always be people that don't understand your identification or the way in which you work? If neurodiverse people aren't given the space to be able to do that, to flexibly work to communicate this in a way that they need to their senior management, even if they're not managed on a day to day basis, I think in some aspects, whilst we said before that not everyone will know the solutions that they can give to their employers, some people will have very specific things that they know works for them. I think allowing people and trusting that people will do their job and they will do it properly, by giving them the freedom that they need, you will end up with a happier workforce, and probably a more productive one as well.

Russ Norton 38:08

I agree on a ground level, but I think ultimately, let's be real, that boardroom cares about numbers and growth and shareholder returns. As soon as there is that "do we lose a bit of return in order to accommodate a few more humans or do we invest that money and believe that in the long term that will give us a return?" When it comes down to the actual decision making of who do we prioritise, our people or our shareholders, that's when all that goodwill can be lost in an instant. I think for all aspects of diversity, if the senior leadership team aren't 100% bought in, there's that risk that they'll make an offhanded comment that's insensitive. Yes, we all make mistakes. But if there's that risk, I don't think it's a risk that should be worth paying. I think that senior leadership team 100% must be bought into the value of individuality and humanity and an inclusive workplace. I'm not sure I buy into this 'grassroots inclusive community at ground level, but highly capitalistic, money driven, results driven organisation at the top'. I would love to see change at that senior level.

Mary Buxton 39:33

If you are a leader who's looking at the long game, surely looking at if you're a service led business, investing in your people is going to sort out the bottom line, you just have to look a bit longer down the road.

Mary Buxton 39:48

I love this question. I think it's a couple of things. I would always question if you have a highly effective, high-performing leadership team, I suspect you'll have some neurodivergent people on said team anyway. So, that's one thing. Whether they realise that, or they're prepared to admit that are entirely different questions. I think,

James, I hear what you say. The bit that I think is interesting is how do you start to align your neurodivergent strengths with the value drivers of your organisation? I haven't seen anyone who does it well. We've had some interesting conversations about GCHQ and their long history of going out and deliberately recruiting people who think differently. But I think that's the real opportunity, isn't it? And you change the conversation, because you start to say, this is not about creating an environment where everybody feels comfortable. This is about saying: what are the types of thinking that we need to be successful in this organisation? Where do we find them? And how do we recruit and keep and enable all those types of thinking to be successful, such that we could get all the benefit out of them?" In my mind that's the goal we're aiming for, right? Because if you can do that, it kind of doesn't matter what label you wear. It's about just getting the people you need and setting them up for success and the full breadth of people that you genuinely need. I think that's easy to say but a very long journey to get there. I think it's worth auditing, again, attitudes within organisations. What is the knowledge of neurodiversity in your organisation? If there's only less than 10% that you're aware of, but the opportunity for them to thrive in an environment like that is going to be based partly on the narrative that they face in the organisation. So, reaching all levels of the business, finding out what the attitudes are, and then thinking about relevant training.

Grace Bolton 42:12

I completely agree. And there's loads different ways to approach it. You can kind of say, "right, we need to nail this support and make sure that people don't feel their struggles or struggles". Then we'll think about strengths, and we'll think about strategy and all of that. Alternatively, if you can marry those strengths to the value drivers, like Mary said, and what does our business need? It's like, cool, we understand the end goal. Creating this environment, making sure that people thrive, making sure the support is there. Because I think if you kind of say the end goal is to support people, to me, that's not ambitious enough. Your senior leaders care about the bottom line and support can easily just go off the table. Whereas when you're looking at the strategy, it's a lot more of a powerful conversation. It takes some time, but we saw it when we were thinking a few years ago about how we support our community members best. A few years ago, it was assistive technology. Now we're kind of thinking assistive technology - yeah, is that is helpful for everyone. Everyone uses tech, right? So, it's secondary, or tertiary. The understanding and mentoring, hearing lived experiences, creating a community, understanding your strengths, all the kind of soft skills, which are a little bit harder to navigate and think about. Once you've cracked them, they're a lot more powerful. Technology? It's kind of "Yeah, it's there." So, if you take that one step further and say, "think about your strategy and your strengths and your values, and then support", it's there, and it helps us get there, but it's not the goal.

Russ Norton 44:21

And that, to me, is interesting. Mary, to your example at the very beginning, where you said, "Sometimes I ask the awkward question or the uncomfortable question". It's not about saying, "oh, we need dyslexic people or people on the autistic spectrum." It's "we need a mind like Mary's - someone to challenge our groupthink, or there's a risk that we're all too comfortable with this plan". Has it been tested rigorously? We need their fantastic spotting risks or identifying flaws, and to celebrate that as a trait and even in setting objectives for the year. I might not drive the same kind of figures as someone else, because that's not my skill set, but I might have challenged and made other people's plans significantly more robust. That needs to be rewarded as much as big numbers and a high growth. Again, it's not "we're going to reward you for being dyslexic or dyspraxic, or

autistic". It's "we're going to reward you for helping make our plans much more robust". That's where that kind of alignment to the organisational goals is super, super important. And then that conversation does go full circle.

Mary Buxton 45:34

What's interesting then is, going back to that spiky profile, and saying, "we want to reward those things, we need all these different strings." But it's also recognising that I can't have those strings from that person, if I'm also expecting these other things, because one's a peak and one's a trough if you like. Recognising that the ways I work and the ways I think can be strengths in particular situations. It's brilliant that I can come and look at a problem from a different perspective, at the start of a project. When we're trying to wrap it up, and I go, "Hey guys, why didn't we do it like this?" - less helpful! So, it's about really going "we know what we need, and we know that no one person is going to provide all of those things." We just want to make sure that we get all the best things, and we don't go and expect, in addition to wanting all those brilliant strengths, things which are outside of their skill set. We don't set unrealistic bars and inadvertently create barriers for the things that we do want.

Grace Bolton 46:49

If you look at successful sports teams – take a hockey team, for example. You've got your defenders, you've got your attackers, and you've got your goalie. Just before you're going to score the winning goal, you don't call one of your defenders up to shoot. You understand that and you value different strengths. Build balanced teams, and understand where people can step in, and when they shouldn't. Successful people surround themselves with other people that don't match their skill sets so that we're balanced, which then poses an interesting question which I think Russ hinted at. Is what we are rewarding for or looking at success? Because you could be very successful and experienced in your career, but your skill set is not to manage people. So, if you're in an environment where a successful leader is managing people, then some people might say, "well you're never going to get to the top". Evaluating that and thinking, okay, there are different types of leaders. There are more technical leaders, there are more people-orientated leaders. If they draw on different people to build up their team, anything's possible. I think far too often, it's just to be successful or at the top, because there's that pyramid, you must have people underneath you, and you are responsible to lead those people, which for some people that's their dream, and that's their skill set. For other people it's just not what they're best suited to do. So why force them to do it?

Kate Went 48:50

There is so much more we could say on this. I reckon we could probably talk all afternoon about this topic. It is so big and broad. But we are at the end of this session. Thank you so much for the questions and sorry to those that we didn't manage to get to. There were some requests for any organisations or resources that employers can be signposted to. I'm sure that we can send some good recommendations out along with the recording after this. I will pop that through to you via email and do feel free to connect with any of us here to keep the conversation going. But for now, Grace, Jasmine, Mary, Russ, and Elle, thank you so much for all your thoughts and contributions this afternoon. Hopefully we will see you all at another session