Disability, Queerness, and Employment: How to Foster an Inclusive, Affirming, and Accessible Work Environment for Queer and Neurodivergent Employees

Kaleb Cook (he/they), CTRS, B.S. Cook Inclusive Executive Director and UI LEND Community Trainee

University of Iowa Stead Family Children's Hospital

Background

Thirty-two years following the signing of the Americans with Disabilities Act, people with disabilities continue to be disproportionately employed. According to the US Bureau of Labor, in 2021 only 19.1% of people with disabilities were employed, compared to 63.7% of people without disabilities.

According to the National LGBTQ Task Force, "LGBTQ+ people are more likely than the general population to have a disability and face systemic challenges finding employment, community, and more. Even 29 years after the passage of the ADA, more work is needed to ensure that people with disabilities, including queer people with disabilities, have full and equal access in American society." It is also estimated that 3-5 million queer people have disabilities. On average 2 in 5 disabled adults are transgender and 1 in 4 disabled people identify under the LGB rainbow.

Multiple factors contribute to non-affirming work environments:

- Misgendering co-workers and not using correct pronouns.
- "Don't ask, don't tell" work culture surrounding queerness and neurodivergence.
- Ineffective and/or absence of justice, diversity, equity and inclusion training that focus on queer and neurodivergent topics.
- Co-worker to co-worker micro-aggressions towards one's identity.
- Not having co-worker allies that can gently correct others for misgendering employees.
- Lack of safe spaces and outside of work programs specifically designed to support queer and neurodivergent folks.
- Not providing meeting agendas and time frames 24 hours prior to the meeting.

Objective

To better understand the intersectionality of queerness and neurodivergence as it relates to employment, this study researched employment barriers and gathered effective methods to foster accessible, inclusive and affirming work environments for neurodivergent and queer folks. Three queer and neurodivergent identifying folks in the Roaring Fork Valley (Glenwood Springs, Colorado- Aspen, Colorado) were interviewed and were asked to identify current barriers and essential work environment components related to these individuals' work experiences.

Method

- Conducted a qualitative study to collect feedback through semi-structured interviews based on 3 individuals' personal, lived experiences to gain insight as to how their unique views relate help form their opinions of inclusive and affirming work environments This study will not aim to generalize to a larger audience of employees nor will it yield any generalizable findings as to workplace experiences as a whole.
- Goal is to understand the lived realities and experiences that are limited to only those who consent to participate in the study.

Common Themes

- Importance of normalizing pronoun usage in the workplace
- Many organizations lack effective justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion training and queer and neurodivergent employees desire more progressive and culturally- competent training to be implemented.
- Affirming work culture leads to better job performance, higher retention rates of diverse staff, and overall improved work experiences for queer and neurodivergent employees.
- Queer and neurodivergent employees are often fearful to ask for necessary accommodations because they feel it will impact their working status.

Summary of Findings

When organizations take the necessary steps to ensure all employees are affirmed, included, and have accessible accommodations, queer and neurodivergent employees are more likely to have higher job satisfaction and as a result employers will have a higher retention rate for their neurodiverse and queer staff.

Examples of effective queer-affirming strategies implemented:
- Normalizing the use of pronouns in interviewing, onboarding, co-worker introductions, emails, and in company meetings.
- Placing progressive queer flags visible in the organization's office.
- Offering staff access to queer resources, event recommendations, and community building offerings outside of work that support their queer identity.
- Placing preferred pronouns on company name badge and email signatures.

Examples of effective neurodivergent-affirming strategies implemented:
- Providing meeting schedules and time frames 24 hours prior to the meeting to allow neurodivergent employees to pre-process information to be able to contribute to the meeting
- Offering meetings in hybrid format to accommodate employees sensory and processing needs. Providing flexible seating/standing/stimming options for in-person meetings.
- Asking in interviews if there are any accommodations necessary to complete the job and affirming that this will not impact their hiring decision.
- Providing the option for salaried versus hourly to accommodate unique and varied working styles.

References

"U.S. Bureau of Labor." *U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics*, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, November 11th, 2023, https:www.bls.gov/
"LGBTQ+ and Disability Statistics." *National LGBTQ Task Force*, https://www.thetaskforce.org/category/fact-sheets-infographics/.