

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

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### **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.

To better understand the intersectionality of disability and queerness as it relates to employment, we looked to our neurodivergent and queer community members who are currently employed. Through sharing personal and impactful working experiences, this research will identify employment barriers and look for effective methods that foster accessible, inclusive and affirming work environments for queer and neurodivergent folks.

*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 microaggressions 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 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

Interviews were transcribed and compared using thematic analysis to identify common themes and highlight key characteristics to foster affirming, inclusive, and accessible work environments for queer and neurodivergent employees.

### **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.

### **Observations:**

- Each one of the interviewees shared that they are not out
- "Check-ins at the beginning of every meeting (0-5 how are you feeling) provides space for neurodivergent folks to advocate their needs and helps the whole team better understand where everyone is at prior to starting the meeting"
- "I don't think I have ever worked in a workplace where using pronouns was normalized in work culture"
- "I am so used to being misgendered at work that as long as I feel seen and validated by the person I work directly with, who is my ally, then I can just brush off the rest"
- "I try to cause as little problems as possible with people at work about my gender, so most of the time I just avoid it and keep to myself"
- "I am lucky to be able to hire my own department staff and work isolated from the administrative office. If I had to work in the office, I do not think I could stay in that position for long, because my day would be filled with anxiety from having so many uncomfortable interactions and misgenders throughout my day"
- Each one of the interviewees shared that they are not out to their entire working community, but each have trusted allies at work that help them feel affirmed

- "I wish there was trainings for my co-workers about queerness and neurodivergence, and that the administrators normalized pronouns at work"
- "I am only open about my neurodivergence to the people who work very closely to me. I am too scared to advocate for accommodations, so instead I have created my own structure for myself to make sure I can still function in a neurotypical-centered work environment"
- "This has been the first ever company that has asked for my preferred pronouns. I had never noticed it missing until it was provided to me at this new job. I never felt like it was acceptable to have that conversation"
- "It would be awesome if we lived in a world where it was accepted and normalized to be able to share their necessary accommodations to our employers and have no repercussions"
- "If I could disclose my accommodations and disability at the beginning, that would improve my overall motivation to work well for that company."

Overall, there is a clear trend that queer and neurodivergent employees are not always placed in affirming, inclusive and accessible workplaces. It is evident that there is a need for diversity, equity, justice and inclusion business training to help organizations foster more affirming work environments.

### **Conclusions:**

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 11<sup>th</sup>, 2023, <https://www.bls.gov/>

"LGBTQ+ and Disability Statistics." *National LGBTQ Task Force*, <https://www.thetaskforce.org/category/fact-sheets-infographics/>.