Leadership & Business Podcast

EPISODE 246: ELEANOR LOIACONO – NEURODIVERSITY AT WORK

Eleanor Loiacono

If you look at what our country is saying we need, innovation, creativity, new technologies in that, these are the things that people who think differently come up with.

Female Voice

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Ken White

Welcome to Leadership & Business, the podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. Sharing strategies, information, and insight that help you become a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host, Ken White. Thanks for listening. With each day, more companies and organizations are hiring people who think and approach problems differently. Neurodiversity refers to the variation in which human brains function. A range of conditions fall under the neurodiverse umbrella, from autism to Tourette syndrome to others. The conditions affect the way people communicate, interact, and process information. Eleanor Loiacono is a professor at the William & Mary School of Business. Her research efforts focus on neurodiversity. She joins us on the podcast today to discuss neurodiversity, the hurdles neurodivergent applicants and employees face, and what companies and managers are doing to hire and retain neurodivergent employees. Here's our conversation with Eleanor Loiacono.

Ken White

Well, Eleanor, thanks so much for joining us. It's great to see you. Welcome to the podcast.

Eleanor Loiacono

Thank you. It's great to be here, and thanks for having me.

Ken White

You're doing such interesting work in a field that we hear so much about, but I think people have a lot of questions about neurodiversity. How do you define that?

Eleanor Loiacono

Yeah. So neurodiversity is really just a different way of the brain, of the cognition working. So we think of neurotypical would kind of be what we think of as the norm, even though it's hard to define norm nowadays, but the norm. And then neurodiverse are those who their brain works a little bit differently. I'll give you examples of some of it. If somebody is on the autism spectrum, they oftentimes will also have things like anxiety and depression, too, along with that. You don't necessarily have to be on the autism spectrum. You could just have anxiety or depression, too, to be on there. ADHD, dyspraxia, dyslexia, dyscalculia. We know dyslexia, problems with words and things like that, dyscalculia with math, and dyspraxia with coordination. So oftentimes, some things like that, so brain. It also could include obsessive-compulsive, because again, the brain is working a little bit differently. Tourette syndrome. From when it started, it really came out of autism and the autism spectrum, but it's grown. There's even been some discussions in the community about in terms of the research should it focus on certain things, like just autism, or this broad umbrella term. But really, right now, as it is, it's people who may have one of these conditions. Again, because of that, their brain thinks a little bit differently.

Ken White

Do we have numbers? Do we have any idea what percentage of the population we would consider neurodiverse?

Eleanor Loiacono

Yeah. I would say you have it based on oftentimes the different groups. You might have one in 64 being autistic children. But that's also the number is growing because you're having more and more people as adults be diagnosed, who weren't before. 10% in terms of anxiety, people have anxiety in there. Typically, with disabilities, I'd say 10% to 17%, I think, is about. But that's also growing because if you think about right now, even at the university level, we've seen anxiety and depression skyrocket. If you're seeing it at the college level, you're going to be seeing it within businesses shortly thereafter, which we have. A lot more people are going into the workforce who have neurodiversity on many different levels. Again, anxiety, depression. I think a lot more companies are thinking about this because it's going to be more the norm to have people thinking differently than thinking typical.

Ken White

Right. This is a lot of people that people can hire and use on the team. What were some of the hurdles that Am I saying this correctly? Someone who is neurodivergent?

Eleanor Loiacono

Yes.

Ken White

If someone who is considered neurodivergent, what are some of the hurdles they face in the workplace?

Eleanor Loiacono

Well, the first one that they often face is the actual interviewing process. One of the things, and this is a big thing, is you go into an interview. In some big companies, it may be a huge room where many people are interviewing. But even if not, even if you're just one-on-one in a room, you have somebody. It feels very uncomfortable, especially somebody who is on the autism spectrum, has a lot of anxiety. Depression may not be, or anxiety, I would say, in those types of environments, looking somebody in the eye. In those situations, we oftentimes look for a reflection of ourselves. We're looking to see as an interviewer, somebody who reminds us of us or acts like us, as opposed to what most companies need nowadays, which are people who think differently, because you don't need groupthink. You don't need somebody who thinks the same. You need somebody who can be innovative and creative and think differently. That's oftentimes what people who are neurodiverse do: they give you the opportunity to capture this different way of thinking about a problem. So some ways to counter that that people have talked about, because it's very difficult in that interview setting is, and some companies have started programs, like Microsoft has an autism program, where they have a different way of getting in. And what they do are like job trials, internships. The companies like Microsoft will do where people come in for a week, and they will maybe go work for a particular area, meet with the group, and do work on some project so that the people get to see the work that they can do. Because I think oftentimes the initial, if you're just doing the interview for a half hour or whatever, and you're switching from one to the other, you don't get that perspective. What you really want to do is you want to see how they're going to do at their job, not how they are as a person to just talk to you, that they're the same as you. You want to see that they can do their job and add to the value. That recruitment is one of the biggest areas we see that they don't get in the door because of that. Thinking about recruitment in a different way is really important. I think that's one way companies can think about it. The other is training for managers. We often think that you have to train the person who's neurodiverse to fit in, but really, what it is, is you need to have the manager feel comfortable. I give this example oftentimes that in today's culture, we're so worried about being canceled because we do something wrong, or that somebody is going to record this, or it's going to end up on social media. People are so afraid to ask questions, and managers are very afraid, oftentimes, of insulting. And so companies providing a safe space where if you're going to have. How can you ask a question? I mean, I say it's like if you have somebody who's blind, who's working on your team, and you see them walking towards a wall, how do you handle that? Do you

grab their arm? Do you say stop? I mean, understanding how to deal with that when you may not have grown up with somebody who has a disability or is blind or whatever. I mean, understanding how to handle those situations, that's really helpful because we find research that I've done shows that we did a study with students who would be web developers or programmers. This was in university, and we asked them if you went into a job and your manager wasn't really touting the fact that you should follow accessibility guidelines for the websites and the programs that you were developing, would you say something? The ones that were more adamant who would say something and fight for it and say, We should do this, are ones who either had a disability or knew someone who did. I think that's the thing. It's making people feel more comfortable, letting them understand, talking to people who have a disability. If they've never been around somebody who has, they might feel uncomfortable. Getting them comfortable with the situation. I think the managers are above. It's like they are the ones who really touch at all parts of the organization, so you need to have them trained. Then there's also policies and advocacy. Showing that people, even though there's a lot of CEOs and VPs in the C-suite who have disabilities, not everybody wants to share that they have a disability. Oftentimes, that really helps. It's like, if you can see that people have that and are able to succeed in that company, then you feel more comfortable. It also means that you show that your company is welcoming. That's another recruitment. Some students who are neurodiverse may not look at a company because they feel that they don't see on their website that they are touting about that this is a good thing, and that they're looking for this.

Ken White

I really think of the managers. Managing today is such a hard job. You're talking to them, I'm talking to them. It's really tough. Then, yeah, the interview, you are looking for someone like yourself. You know what you're looking at. When you're seeing someone who does not possess those qualities, it's tough to say, I think this could be a good hire, but they just have to open their minds, more or less.

Eleanor Loiacono

Right. Yeah. I think that that's where the job trials and getting somebody to work on a project with a team gives you the opportunity to see what they can do and how they can think. Because if you look at what our country is saying we need, innovation, creativity, new technologies, and that, these are the things that people who think differently come up with. I mean, that's what we're founded on, is this ability that we think differently, and we have different people working on different or different problems to look at it differently.

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Professor Eleanor Loiacono in just a minute. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business. When it comes to

choosing an MBA program, people sometimes look to the rankings, among other things, for guidance. While the William & Mary MBA program is ranked among the best in the world, the Financial Times includes William & Mary's full-time MBA program in its global top 100. Fortune ranks the executive MBA in its top 20, and US News & World Report lists the online MBA program in its top 20. If you're thinking about pursuing an MBA, check out all the indicators of quality, like a world-class faculty, unparalleled student support, and a brand that's highly respected, the William & Mary MBA. Reach out to our admissions team to learn which of our four MBA programs best fits you: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the Executive MBA. Check out the MBA program at William & Mary at wm.edu. Now, back to our conversation with Professor Eleanor Loiacono.

Ken White

From your research standpoint, what are some of the things you're looking at? What are you trying to learn about?

Eleanor Loiacono

I'm looking one thing is how you can train managers. How do you help managers in doing this? Really interesting, the research I did where I interviewed companies that had created programs for autism spectrum and neurodiverse. The biggest thing was good management. I'll share some examples. A lot of times, people who are neurodiverse want to have some security in terms of what's going on. Having an agenda when you go into a meeting is really helpful. Having minutes that are taken that are then sent out. When you have that agenda, sticking to the agenda, all these things that we teach here as a good management practice that people learn in the courses that we teach, those are the things that they really appreciate. We've seen and heard that people who are neurodiverse really appreciate that, that helps them, but it also helps the team. When managers do that, it also helps everybody because you also have to realize that there's some people who may have disclosed that they're neurodiverse, but that there's a lot of people who aren't going to feel comfortable disclosing. Being able to have that just good practices means you're bringing a lot more people in to the team. Really, we've seen it's just good management practices, but a lot of time managers get, I don't want to say lazy, but there's so much else to do that that's things that fall short. When they have somebody who says this would really help, and they do that, you see the effect throughout the team, not just that individual.

Ken White

Interesting. Yeah, how interesting. So yeah, it pays off twice as much. Yeah. Oh, interesting. What are some of the other things that you're looking at? Are you focusing mostly on management at this point?

Eleanor Loiacono

Yeah. Management. We're also looking at different groups. I'm looking to see the different communities we had talked about that people feel comfortable in. So, communities where you have furries, we had talked about that. There's a lot of community where there's high technology usage, understanding, but wanting to feel meeting more people. I think that's one thing is wanting to belong. There is still wanting to belong into that. A lot of companies having affinity groups, and that with people who they can meet people within the organization and help, that's also another thing. Right now, I'm switching a little bit. I did a lot to look at how students perceive going into the workforce. I look at management and how companies can handle it. I don't know if this will be used, but I think it's a little bit more difficult right now with this research with the way DEI has been treated, even though we're not talking we're not talking about anybody being less than or incapable, because that's one of the big misconceptions that I've talked about whenever I've done research in that, is that we're not talking about people who aren't qualified. These are people who are very qualified. They just may not interview the way that other people may interview, and that even when you have accommodations for people who may be neurodiverse, 56% of them are of no cost, and about 37% less than $300. We're talking about things that just may keep things more organized, timely. There's these things that people think are going to take a lot away from the cost or that the people aren't capable of doing it, that's not true. When people are hiring people who are neurodiverse, if they get the job, they are capable of doing the job. That's just one thing that I think is with DEI, and that people feel a little or anti-DEI is this uncomfortableness that you're accepting people are going to take somebody on the job who isn't qualified. That's really not true. They're capable, they're reliable. You're not going to hire the person if they're not capable of doing it. What you're doing is just like with everybody else in your organization is you're saying, How can I make you most effective at your job? As an organization, what can we provide you? We do that with executives and everybody else. You can take notes now on your phone, so it can transcribe, so you don't have to do that. The thing is, how do you open that up to all of your employees to make them more productive and efficient? I think that's something that we can look at is the neurodiversity helping us realize that we need to look at all individual workers and say, How can we help them? Regardless, if they've told us if they've had a disability, if they've. Maybe something would help. For example, I always use this, as we age, by the time we're 40, most people have at least one disability. You're wearing glasses, you have some of your hearing goes, coordination as you get older. If we figure these things out for people who are younger as they're coming in, and if we just have these things available for our workers in general, now we're able to keep them longer. We're able to offer them tools to say, Well, what do you need at this point as you work? Maybe you need a screen reader at some point because something happened to your eye or you need dictation to do it. Right now, as we have AI, we have a lot more things available to do that. I think looking at the individual worker and not just saying we have a group with people who are neurodiverse or have this or have that, but looking at it and saying, Okay, how can we create this toolkit that is helpful to all of our

employees based on where they are at this moment in time? That would help neurodiverse employees, neurotypical who may have broken a leg or have eye surgery, any of these different things. You're looking at really the individual worker and how to help them.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Professor Eleanor Loiacono, and that's it for this episode of Leadership & Business. Our podcast is brought to you by the William & Mary School of Business, home of the MBA program offered in four formats: the full-time, the part-time, the online, and the executive MBA. Check out the William & Mary MBA program at wm.edu. Thanks to our guest, Eleanor Loiacono, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White, wishing you a safe, happy, and productive week ahead.

Female Voice

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