

Addressing the special needs of a neuro-diverse workforce

One of the fastest growing segments of the American talent pool is the “neuro diverse,” the portion of Americans who have been diagnosed with autism, ADHD, dyslexia and Aspergers. This spring, global behavior health technology company Rethink Benefits launched the Neurodiversity Inclusion Center to focus on the training of managers and colleagues of the neuro diverse community. Members of this community work inside Facebook, SAP, HP, Microsoft and other firms. “Using Rethink’s E-Learning modules and clinical support system, managers will learn strategies for interviewing, strategies for helping employees adapt to change, strategies for conflict resolution. Managers will be trained to identify and address issues before they escalate,” says a Rethink Benefits spokesman.

Employee Benefit Adviser recently spoke with Mike Civello, vice president of employee benefits for Rethink Benefits, about the center’s mission, what this population means to HR executives, and which companies are embracing employees who think differently.

Employee Benefit Adviser: Please tell me about the Neurodiversity Inclusion Center and how you got started.

Michael Civello: We initially launched in the market as a parent and caregiver benefits service for major employers that offer Rethink company-wide so that employees who have a child with a developmental disability or special need can leverage our system as part of their benefits package. We provide parents with interesting, practical and digestible training programs so that they can ultimately learn from the best practice, behavioral intervention method in the market and how to apply them to their daily life. We teach parents how to communicate and work with their children on every level.

Many clients have appreciated the program because in the healthcare and school system landscape, there’s a severe shortage of trained professionals to work with these children. While you wouldn’t want to see a technology program replaced direct services by any stretch of the imagination, for many parents this is really one of the only lifelines that they have available to them. That’s also the justification that employers leverage when they make the decision to offer Rethink as an employee benefit.



Mike Civello

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EBA: What companies did you work with?

Civello: When we started working with some of the more progressive employers who started offering their parents and caregiver benefits, these are employers like Amazon, Facebook, SAP and HP. They immediately put two and two together and said “we are hiring and trying to better support our own employees themselves who have conditions like autism.”

We started to deep dive with these employers who are ahead of the curve and we’re hiring, onboarding and providing career pathing and services for employees with autism and other conditions. Around this time, the term “neurodiversity” was born. The first time I saw it was leveraged in Microsoft’s diversity and inclusion language and programming related to these types of employees and they’re a client we work with.

EBA: Can you explain neurodiversity?

Civello: We love the term “neurodiversity” because it gets away from just focusing on disability. The goal is to send a very different message to the employment community. We don’t want this to be seen as an altruistic approach. When you look at companies that do it right and I’m talking about programming related to ethnicity, skin color, LGBTQ, gender all of those areas, when they do it right, the bottom line is it benefits companies immensely if you have thought diversity.

EBA: Can you give me an example of a company that does it right?

Civello: Really the number one organization for diversity and inclusion is [a major insurance firm] because they have seen a direct correlation to the programming that they provide to their employees to their superior patient care. It’s this huge initiative. They are a partner in the marketplace because we work with them on a number of client deployments in terms of referral systems.

EBA: What companies are working with the neuro diverse?

Civello: We partnered with clients that were ahead of the curve in that they had some grass roots efforts that were focused on employees

with autism and other conditions that were considered neuro diverse. SAP and Microsoft are great examples. They both targeted autism hiring programs which is unusual. Very few organizations have these types of market-based efforts.

SAP and Microsoft have stated that employees with autism show higher rates of productivity, retention and in certain areas outperform their peers. There are certain gifts that come with certain conditions like an autism diagnosis such as better pattern recognition, detail orientation, filling in in excellent technology and design positions. It’s just that their brains are wired differently than a neuro typical person and that can sometimes have challenges but it can also have successes.

Right now the focus is predominantly on protocols and procedures and protections for employees with disabilities but it’s really only specific to physical disabilities because certain accommodations have to be made. If you’re blind or have a hearing impairment, clearly you need an accommodation but there’s no clear protocols if an employee enters the workforce and they have a condition like autism. What do you do? You can’t ask them.

EBA: Do these people need advocates? This population may not have the social skills or the ability to defend themselves during performance reviews.

Civello: Absolutely. The Neurodiversity Inclusion Center that we’re creating is looking to be that advocacy center. Assuming they’ve even made it through the interviewing process, when you look at some of the statistics, 80% of adults with autism who actually have a four-year college degree are underemployed or unemployed in their field of study because they don’t even make it through the interview. Why? Because of things like eye contact.

That’s mind blowing to me. When they are lucky enough to get into some type of employment situation, it’s not necessarily that they can’t advocate for them, it’s that places are not adapting to allow them to advocate for themselves. They have a system that’s designed for one or two different types of employees but not four or five different types unfortunately.