



Centre for Inclusive Employment & Disability Employment Australia

Lunch & Learn Session | Wednesday, 10 December 2025

Understanding Neurodiversity: Language, Inclusion & Psychological Safety

Speaker: Nicole Done | Principal, Neurodiversity Enablement | Xceptional Academy

Host: Sally Karandews (DEA)

SALLY KARANDREWS: Hi everyone, and thank you for joining us for this week's Lunch and Learn, the 8th in our series so far and I think the final one for this year. My name is Sally and I will be hosting the session today. I am coming to you from the land of the Darkinjung people and I pay my respect to Elders, past, present and emerging. If you would like to access the captions for today's session, Liv will pop instructions for how to do that into the chat. If you do require any other technical support or have any other questions about accessibility along the way, please pop those into the chat as well. So today's Lunch and Learn session is around neurodiversity inclusion, and we are joined by Nicole, the principal of Neurodiversity Enablement at Xceptional Academy. Nicole has an extensive career history in neurodiversity advocacy, and has also worked across the learning and development professional training and a few other associated roles as well. Nicole will take us through her presentation in a moment. If you have any questions along the way, please feel free to pop those into the Q&A or the chat and if there is any time left we will come to those at the conclusion of Nicole's presentation. But in the meantime, I will hand over to Nicole, thank you.

NICOLE DONE: Hello everybody. Lovely to spend the time with you. Just putting my shared screen up. As Sally so kindly introduced me I am Nicole don't, I am from Xceptional Academy. I will tell you a little bit about Xceptional Academy before we get going, but first of all I just wanted to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which I am presenting

today, the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation and I want to pay my respects to Elders past and present, particularly those that have joined us on the call today. I want to thank them for their ongoing care for land and waters. The area I live close to Sydney Harbour, we are so fortunate for the beautiful lands that we have.

A little bit about myself and Xceptional Academy just before we get going. I have been working with Xceptional Academy now for just over 6 years. If you haven't heard about us, we are neurodiversity experts. We work very closely with organisations and workplaces across all sectors as well as our passion for working with the neurodivergent community, and our work mainly focuses on workforce planning, so looking at recruitment, looking at employment opportunities for the neurodivergent community. We provide neuroinclusion training, both live sessions as well as on-demand. We have a great passion for our advisory work that we do, particularly around policy development and neuroinclusive approaches building in universal design, and we also do assessment and coaching. The assessment isn't diagnostic assessment, it is workplace assessment where we try to marry skillset of various individuals that we work with and look at role scoping and role matching to ensure somebody can thrive. Our coaching is also available for neurodivergent individuals as well as teams and managers, we do a lot of work to build leadership capability and embed neuroinclusion into individuals' teams that they are working with. But that's enough about Xceptional Academy today. Let's go on and delve into this presentation. So this is really giving you the fundamentals about neurodiversity today so that you have a bit more of an idea of the differences at how this area has evolved, the language. We are going to put a particular emphasis on psychological safety. So I am going to unpack for you right now what neurodiversity is. We are going to look at the strengths and some of the skill profile that we see within the neurodivergent community. We are going to look at language and the terminology as well as prevalence, and then move into putting that all into context. Some practical strategies around building psychological safety.

When I talk about neurodiversity I am talking about human brains. Brains don't come in a one-size-fits-all model, and that is what we call neurodiversity. Neuro, is brain, diversity is difference. It is brain difference, the neurological package that everybody brings, the same way we build, or we bring to this call today. Neurodiversity encompasses the diversity and the variations of

cognitive functioning within the community. Everyone has different brains and skills in terms of their thinking, attention and memory. Think of a different brain the same way that you would think of diversity across different skin colours, or even different genders. Another way that's useful to look at neurodiversity is through a biodiversity lens. I have up on the screen a beautiful coral garden under the sea. Imagine that the ocean is brimming with life, coral gardens glowing with colour, schools of fish darting in every direction, sharks keeping balance from the top of the food chain right down to the plankton which is quietly producing most of the world's oxygen. Every species plays a role. Every difference matters. Over time the ocean starts losing its variety. The coral reefs bleach and break down. Smaller fish disappear. The big predators struggle, even in this scenario the currents will shift. Suddenly the ocean, once full of resilience becomes fragile. A single pressure, like a heatwave or a change in acidity produces the image we see in front of us right now, which is a coral reef that has lost its colour, it has lost its life, and it is really struggling. This big change has made the whole ecosystem collapse with fewer species performing fewer roles. There is nothing left to absorb the shock. Scientists actually call this an ecosystem tipping point, the moment when they have lost so much diversity that the system can no longer recover. The truth is the ocean didn't collapse because one species was weak; it collapsed because the ecosystem was too uniform. It tried to function with too little variation, too few differences, too few adapting. This is exactly what happens in human systems, including the workplaces that we support people when we expect everybody to think the same, work the same, communicate the same and process information the same way. When cognitive diversity shrinks resilience shrinks with it, problems become harder to solve, innovation dries up, teams lose their capacity to adapt to change and just like the ocean the system becomes fragile. Now, when we think of neurodivergent thinkers, and we are talking about autistic individuals, ADHDers, Tourettes, gifted, acquired neurodivergence, each of these brings a variety of strengths to the human ecosystem. This they fill roles of problem-solving, pattern recognition, creativity, risk assessment, systems thinking that otherwise would be missing. Without neurodiversity workplaces run the risk of becoming the equivalent of that bleached reef. Uniform, depleted, vulnerable under pressure. Biodiversity keeps the oceans alive, neurodiversity keeps organisations alive. When we lose diversity we lose resilience. Here is the big shock for so many organisations, they have more neurodivergent employees than they think. When I started working heavily in the employment neuroinclusion space just over six years ago, I was talking to organisations about tapping into skillset and being able to use the wonderful skills that neurodivergent individuals

bring. It was like managers were leaning in because this was a new opportunity. Actually the conversation has changed now. The conversation is we already have people embedded in our organisations, how can we make the systems around us more inclusive to ensure that everybody thrives? So here are some of the strengths that I see in my work every day. We know that a lot of neurodivergent individuals have very high concentration levels. We know there is faster problem-solving, being able to think outside the box, being able to look at problems and find solutions in ways that others can't. Tapping into those memory skills, having the ability to look at problems and the attention to detail that we see. There is a reason why around the world Government organisations are tapping into this cyber security hiring programs neurodivergent staff members, for that strong pattern and attention to detail. We see this with the Belgium police force who have neurodivergent teams specifically for their surveillance. We see in Australia the cyber security units down in the Federal government has set up, we see also in Canada this has also happened. Another area that we don't talk about enough is the high integrity that we see amongst the neurodivergent community, extremely loyal, honest individuals, extremely hard working who want to get in and make a real difference. When I do on-boarding assessments with neurodivergent individuals I talk to them about what is their motivation, and generally I hear time and time again the same comment, "I want to be part of something bigger than myself. I want to make impact to some sort of organisation that has social impact." Then we also see that very high retention rate, and you'll see that stat that I have on the screen, 92% through the SAP program, but we also see that across Microsoft's hiring programs, we see when Xceptional Academy was doing our recruitment services sitting at over 95% over a two year period. Tapping into these skillsets is very, very important for the community. But let's also look at neurodivergent strengths profiles, because me just telling you about these very strong skillsets doesn't set the full picture. You'll see here a chart which shows a profile of an ADHDer. This profile is showing what we would refer to as a Spiky Profile. Spiky profile was actually coined by Dr D Grant in 2009 and it was published by Professor Amanda Kirby, and the notion that many neurodivergent individuals when we look at their profile of skillset we see very big highs, and strong strengths, but also areas where there is challenges. Now on that slide we will see that there is a red line across the middle sitting at 5. It is numbered between 0 and 10. You'll see across that that spiky profile, that the average neurotypical individual may sit along that pale red band, two up, two down. So up to 7 and down to 3. But you'll see this particular individual they have many skills sitting up as high as 9, and some sitting down at 1. This is what we see very heavily amongst the

neurodivergent community. Very strong skillset in some areas, and this particular person we'll see creativity is extremely high. We'll see logical and reasoning ability very high; however there is other areas that are going to be tough in this particular case you'll see that this person struggles with multitasking. Everybody has strengths and areas they need support, but it tends to be more extreme when it comes to the neurodivergent community. That doesn't mean to say that there is not meaningful work that every neurodivergent individual can lean into, it is about being able to look at how we can tap into and utilise those really strong skills.

Let's take a step back and look at the timeline of neurodiversity, because it has changed greatly. In this space I have been working for over 25 years and I can tell you it is evolving at a rapid rate. The language I was using five years ago has changed compared to today. I am not going to go into this timeline in too great a detail, but you'll see that in the first band between 1940 and 1960 this was the time where we first saw that there was a clinical description of autism. It started in the 1970's where there was a broader disability human rights. Then from the 1990's things started to change quite quickly. In 1993 that was a big time for Australia. It is when our Disability Discrimination Act came in. It also, in 1998 was when Judy Singer, an Australian sociologist who lives in Sydney today, when she was writing her thesis she coined the term "neurodiversity". Judy at that time was the first person who started discussing the idea that there was real strengths within the neurodivergent community instead of the deficits that were definitely being discussed up until that point. You'll see on that timeline that things changed greatly. So in the 1990's there was that nothing about us without us conversation, it was about building the advocacy rights within the community. Then as it expanded we started to see a real change, a real rise in research, research around strengths, around masking that we see within the community and in 2013 was when there was a very big change in terms of the diagnosis of autism and the scrapping of the formal diagnoses of Aspergers. It changed rapidly and we started to see a big movement happen from around what I have got there 2016 around the idea of neurodiversity at work. We started seeing hiring programs specifically within organisations. Then things greatly changed, the pandemic changed conditions when many neurodivergent individuals experienced reduced masking demands and finally recognised their true needs. This sparked a sharp rise in adult diagnosis, identification and peer-led in social media. There has been a very big change over the last couple of years around neuroaffirming language and we've seen a change in workplaces where we have moved beyond recruitment

programs towards broader systematic change particularly around inclusive leadership, being aware of the sensory environment and how important office spaces need to be built, and of course universal design. We are seeing a very big change moving post-2025 towards psychological safety and the understanding of how AI can dramatically impact the workability and sustainability for all workers, including neurodivergent workers.

Let's have a little snapshot now at language and prevalence. So as we've spoken so far, you'll have noticed me using the word "neurodivergent". I also hear a lot of individuals choosing neurodistinct or neurotypical. That's when we describe an individual. The term neurodiverse is typically used when referring to a group of people. This call is neurodiverse. An individual isn't neurodiverse. Then I would describe somebody who sits under the neurodivergent umbrella as a neurominority group describing a population of people with the same neurodivergence. Language has changed and evolved greatly around the language we use to describe somebody, or they describe themselves. Person-first language, a person with is deeply rooted in the idea of early disability advocacy and the idea of somebody identifying as a human. Then identity-first language is another area that has greatly evolved, and that is around the identity of the individual. We see that that is embraced by a lot of the autistic community, capitalising on the idea that the individual's symptoms or their disability is integrated into their identity. I'd like you now in the chat to give me a bit of an idea of what you think is the majority within the neurodivergent community do you think most people would prefer person-first language or identity-first language? So we are having a lot of people saying identity, and a lot of people saying person-first. Probably about 50/50 coming in on the chat at the moment. So you might be surprised to know - there we go, it has come up. Believe it or not the latest research is showing that 85% of the neurodivergent community prefer identity-first language. Now, it is a deeply personal choice and there is no right or wrong answer here. When I am working with somebody who has disclosed to me I ask them, I say, "Do you identify as autistic or what is the language that you like?" It is okay to ask that question very, very directly. By doing that we are leaning into the notion of asking individuals, and wanting to understand their perspective, not making assumptions. 85% of the community, as I said, are asking for identity first. I will hear quite often individuals say to me, "I am an ADHDer, I don't arrive at work and put my backpack down with my ADHD, it is embedded in how I work, how my brain works." It is not an add-on. A lot of the neurodivergent community do tend to shy away from that person first seeing it more as an

empowering language. We also see that within the community in terms of steering away from deficit language, so someone is or identifies as neurodivergent. We would not use the word "Living with", and we try not to comment on someone's functioning or their perceived ability. With an autism diagnosis now it is a diagnosis of type 1, 2 or 3. When somebody, a bit like you would see with somebody being diagnosed with diabetes. What we see there is type 1 meaning the least amount of support, type 3 the most. But that can be very hard to understand because it changes week to week, it changes in different settings, and how somebody grows and evolves. When we focus on just the strengths and supports of somebody without commenting on their functioning, so if they are mild or severe, these notions are unhelpful and they are quite often very inaccurate. We also need to minimise talking about somebody's experience when we don't understand. Comments like, "You don't look like you are autistic. Oh, everybody is a little bit on the spectrum. I am a bit OCD", all these stories really minimise the true extent to somebody's lived experience, and this is a fabulous quote that really talks to that. "So mild autism doesn't mean one experiences autism mildly, it means you experience their autism mildly. You may not know how hard they've had to work to get to the level that they are." Let's have a look at prevalence now. So we've got there 20% of the population are neurodivergent. That comes from the British medical journal 2020 on a study that was done Neurodiversity At Work. That in many organisations that I am working in actually quite a low percentage in a lot of the finance industry, in analytical and technical work, in legal firms, we are seeing as high as 40% within some organisations. You'll see one of the most common neurodivergent diagnosis is dyslexia and I know recently there was a fabulous presentation on dyslexia that was put in as part of this Lunch and Learn series, but 1 in 10, over 2 million Australians are dyslexic. Dyslexia also quite often has a dual diagnosis with many other neurodivergent conditions, and dyspraxia is one of the most common. So up to 52% of dyslexics also have a diagnosis of dyspraxia. You'll see dyspraxia, ADHD and dysgraphia sit within 1 in 20, 5% of the population, 1.3 million. I do hear in my work many people say there seems to be a rise in diagnosis. There is not a rise in diagnosis, there is not a rise in symptoms, if anything there is a greater understanding as there has been more access to research, to social media and the general media has also embraced in terms of educating and understanding the presentation of an ADHDer. I would say the biggest change has actually happened in the research understanding a female presentation. So the rate of diagnosis of women in their 30's and 40's is one of the greatest growing areas, and up until this time there hasn't been an understanding of the fact that many women present differently to the hyperactive little boy that we would have

thought of many years ago. Then in front of us we've also got 1 in 70 autistic individuals. Now that is changing rapidly as well. I can let you know that the Australian Bureau of Statistics findings from 2022, which was only released last year, there was a jump of 41% in terms of autism diagnosis or people identifying as autistic from 2018 to 2022. It has also been genuinely accepted that the ratio for autistic community is 1 to 4 females, however research again is showing that many women are undiagnosed and the presentations again look very, very different. Then lastly we need to think about access to diagnostic across all areas of neurodivergent community. We are seeing coming into the workforce a much greater number within Australia who have a diagnosis now. Across the autistic community 6.1% of males between 5 and 14 years have a diagnosis. Again that came from 2022, so that age group is building very quickly and meeting employment age.

So what are we seeing in terms of trends? I'd love to see if you are working in this area, if you could put in the chat some of the trends that you are seeing. While you are doing that I am going to go through some of the trends that we are seeing at Xceptional Academy. So unfortunately unemployment remains very high and we do see often 2 to 6 times higher than the general non-disabled community. We also see unfortunately a lot of under-employment. So that is individuals who are working in roles where it is not aligned with their skillset, and unfortunately they are not able to contribute with their strengths in a way that we would like to see. The next area that we do see as I mentioned before that late identity is rising. So we are seeing coming to us working with us individuals who are getting a late diagnosis and that has happened after a long period of long-term work, or instability and unfortunately burnout. We are seeing within organisations that younger generation really demanding inclusion in workplaces, and psychological safety is part of that conversation. We are seeing masking and fatigue in high performing individuals who have done that for many, many years, unfortunately their mental health declining, general fatigue across this community. We are seeing demand for neuroaffirming practices growing and we are seeing a lot of leaders in spaces across all sectors really leaning in and wanting to build out more neuroinclusive hiring practices, leadership practices and ways of working. That leadership and understanding unique presentations and communication styles and being able to work together and understand is very, very important and we are seeing leaders wanting to lean into that. The last area that we are very much seeing is organisations who are starting to really tap into now that notion that if we marry strengths into skilled roles we

carve out roles for those neurodivergent strengths, then there is going to be much better results in terms of productivity, capacity and also wellbeing, which is so important.

I am going to now break apart some of the psychological safety areas. I can see before I did we have got unemployment remains high in some of the comments. Concerns about stereotyping in workplaces, yes, still a challenge. In the transition to work team we work with youth and we are seeing increased numbers of young people that disclose. Absolutely. In fact a lot of the work that I do is being brought into organisations where Gen Z's or Millennials are disclosing and senior leaders are dumbfounded because they don't have the language and understanding in being able to support and are wanting to upskill quite rapidly, which is a positive that we are seeing, but it is positive that reframing that the younger generations are now wanting to be able to be their authentic self and disclose.

In terms of psychological safety I am going to close my mouth for a moment and let you read a little bit about Emily before we have a discussion. So Emily is somebody who we see in many organisations doing fabulous work, really good at procedural work, very empathetic, somebody who is a very careful thinker, very detailed-orientated but avoids speaking up, struggles to cope with change and that rapid evolution of movement within an organisation really does like to stick to routine and structure, avoiding challenges. I am going to pull up Emily now. I'd love for you to put in the chat what do you think in terms of the feeling safe Emily would love others to know about her? I love that first one, competent, yes, she absolutely is. Thank you Sonya. Anybody else got any ideas? I am going to then put up some of the things that I know about Emily. It is not that she is unambitious, she just needs to feel psychological safe to take risks. I can see somebody else has said, focus on strengths and how to assist those challenges. Yeah. Often wants to engage more but struggles with the fear of discomfort and unpredictability. Small structured ways to contribute, like written feedback instead of having to contribute in verbal discussions. Encouragement without pressure makes a big difference for someone like Emily and gentle reassurance that asking questions is a sign of engagement not incompetency. A lot of the coaching work we are

doing is reframing what asking a question looks like for many neurodivergent individuals. Emily dreams of feeling more confident and taking on new challenges without the fear of holding her back. She wishes she could contribute more openly. Say yes to opportunities and connect with colleagues without over-thinking every interaction and second guessing herself. Being comfortable to ask for help when she needs it rather than struggling in silence. A lot of individuals like Emily are in workplaces, and they are not understood, they are not understood that their quietness and the fact that they try to remain unnoticed really is a sign of struggle. I am going to put two other individuals up now. Again, what would make these individuals feel psychologically safe? I have got Riley here. Riley is a real go-getter. She speaks up, she very direct in the workplace. She really wants real change in the charity sector she works. She aims to create workplaces where neurodivergent people don't have to fight for inclusion. There is a hope of balance between advocating and protecting her own wellbeing. But being a strong person who is emotionally invested in her work shouldn't be seen as being a flaw, but as a strength. Then there is Alex who seems fine to everybody, but ultimately Alex wants to remain unnoticed, seemingly blending into the workplace without having to manage the energy costs of being at work because of the sensory environment and the communication challenges. They long for an environment where they can just work in their natural style without feeling pressure to actually mask who they are. All these things are so important for building psychological safety within the neurodivergent community. So what actually do I mean when I say psychological safety? For neurodivergent individuals feeling safe to show up authentically, not having to mask, not having to pretend, not having to second guess themselves without fear of negative consequences, being different in the way that they think, communicate, process and work. Here are some of the areas that we need to think about when we are building on that psychological safety within any group. Safety to communicate differently, being able to ask questions, clarify without being judged. Open to communicate in writing instead of verbally. Not being penalised for a slower sponsor taking a question too literally. We do see within a lot of the neurodivergent community auditory processing can just be slightly delayed and I am only talking a second or two, but that means that communicating and speaking up, finding a gap in conversation and keeping up with group conversation can just be a challenge for a lot of individuals, and people understanding that makes it huge difference. I mentioned freedom from masking. Being able to stim if somebody needs to to fidget to avoid eye contact, feeling safe to sit quiet in a group or risk small talk. I have recently been coaching an individual who was going to be put on probation because he

was always late to Teams calls and the notion from his manager was that because he was late he was disorganised. His work technically was brilliant, but his executive functioning was being questioned; however, when I sat down and had a conversation with this individual he was deliberately arriving late to calls, a few minutes late, maybe 5 minutes, because he desperately was paralysed by the idea of having to small talk. Something that was highly coachable, but somebody who risked losing their role because of a lack of understanding of something that was so small really within the work environment. Understanding that everybody needs their space, so that being able to request adjustments without fear of being perceived as difficult; knowing their needs and what is expected of them. So clear deadlines, opportunity to work in a quieter space, having written instructions that they can review, understanding that executive functioning does look different, so time management, task switching, interruptions and working memory are all things that we can support with strategies, but to understand that that needs to happen. Clear agendas helps somebody with their working memory, switching tasks, understanding what's coming next.

Safety to disclose or not disclose and feel safe for who they are and not being prejudiced against it. Opportunity to be flexible, and work from home or work in an alternative location if it is appropriate for their role. Of course their environment, understanding the sensory environment and how that can have a cognitive, a physical and an emotional impact because of having to regulate in a high sensory environment. So if you come away from today with just a couple of things, this is what I would like you to think about. The idea of allowing processing time, using clear, direct language, share information early, so agendas changes, reduce sensory stress, make it safe to a, "I need", and reframing that notion of being able to say, "I am really great at my job. My strengths are X, Y and Z, but if you could provide for me it would help me with my productivity." Make that normal those conversations because we all feel that way. Offer proactive adjustments. I had a coaching call just this morning with somebody who was so upset because they have to keep applying for flexible work arrangements every 6 months. These notions, the idea that flexibility to be able to access their work would change every 6 months was so distressing and wrong for that person. It is these things that cause a huge emotional toll and impact somebody's psychological safety. Now, I realise we

are just getting to the end. I am just putting up here, please jump to Xceptional Academy's website. We have a lot of resources on there that you can download if you'd like to understand more. If you'd like to understand more about individual neurominority groups which we didn't have time to today, there is resources in there as well. I'd just like to stay on the line now and just take a few questions if anybody has them.

SALLY KARANDREWS: Thanks so much for that Nicole, that was really insightful. I had a couple of questions come through. Thomas is looking to connect with you about a possible session, so Thomas, I will reach out to you afterwards, I can share some ways to get in contact with Xceptional Academy so that you can line that up.

NICOLE DONE: My details are also up on the screen, so that will help as well Sally and there is also a QR code for my LinkedIn if that's more helpful as well.

SALLY KARANDREWS: In terms of a question, we did have one going back to the Emily case study, if Emily spoke to her employer and mentioned that she did find the noisy work environment challenging, but her employer's response was somewhat dismissive, something along the lines of "Workplaces are noisy and that's just the way it is", is there anything Emily could do? What might her next steps be in a situation like that?

NICOLE DONE: It is very hard when we work in an environment where people are dismissive and they really don't understand. I would try to, in that situation with Emily, coach them to be able to explain how effectively they do work in a quieter environment and what are the sensory impacts when they don't. Xceptional Academy actually does a sensory simulation with employers as part of our neuroinclusion champions course and that is a very big eye opener for a lot of employers, not understanding how impactful sensory load is on somebody. I would also say for someone like Emily she would be able to access Job Access supports for funding through the Federal government, and if anybody wants to contact me I have a sheet that explains that process and how you can access funding, but Emily would actually be able to apply through that funding for noise cancelling headphones in an environment. As part of that funding people can also use that money towards coaching, they can use it

with an employer towards neuroinclusion training, and all those things would probably, I would say, help someone like Emily.

SALLY KARANDREWS: Awesome. If you do have questions about Job Access one of our earlier Lunch and Learns was with Georgia.

NICOLE DONE: Fabulous, they are the source of all knowledge.

SALLY KARANDREWS: Nicole that's all we had time for today, but I just wanted to thank you for taking us through that presentation on neurodiversity and creating neurodiversity inclusive workplaces. It was a great kind of overview of some language and some really practical tips there that we can take away. If anyone wants to relisten to this presentation or share it with their colleagues, we will make the recording and a copy of the slides available. Or if you had any further questions please feel free to reach out to us at DEA or the Centre For Inclusive Employment or Nicole@Xceptional Academy and we will be able to work with you. Until then, thank you so much. We'll be in touch with the program of work for over the December/January period and we'll be back with some further Lunch and Learn sessions next year. Thank you so much everyone and thank you especially Nicole and Hanif and Liv who have been making things work in the background.

NICOLE DONE: Thank you, yes, to the background staff, brilliant. Thank you everybody.

SALLY KARANDREWS: Thanks everyone.

(End)

