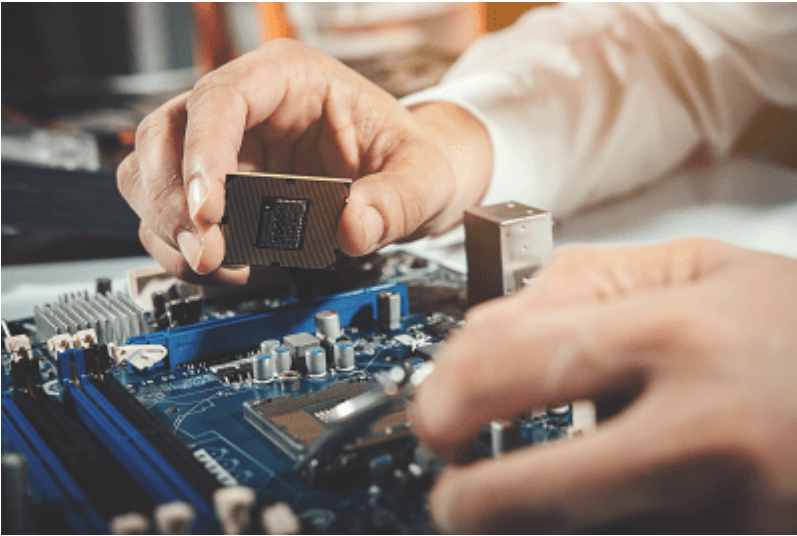


Neurodiversity: The Silent 4IR Talent



“Diversity of thought” or “neurodiversity” has been at the top of the business agenda for the last few years, and once again gained unforeseen attention during a Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) meeting, chaired by the World Economic Forum (WEF).

Neurodiversity refers to the variations in the human brain regarding sociability, learning, attention, mood and other mental functions. The concept was popularised in the late 1990s by Australian sociologist Judy Singer and American journalist Harvey Blume.

Which individuals are included in the neurodivergent population?

The neurodivergent population includes people with dyslexia, autism, dyspraxia (difficulty in coordination and movement), ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), ADD (attention deficit disorder), Asperger's (difficulty to effectively socialise and communicate), and also includes any condition that affects some, but not all, thinking skills. Historically, these alternative thinking styles were viewed negatively, with a focus on the difficulties each person faces, especially once they enter the job market. However, the concept of "neurodiversity" (rather than "mental illnesses" or "mental deficits" or "mental disabilities") provides a paradigm shift in how we think about mental functioning. Instead of regarding large portions of the public as suffering from a mental deficit, disease or dysfunction in their mental processing, neurodiversity suggests that we should speak about *differences in cognitive functioning*. In the same way as we refer to cultural diversity, we need to start using this term when talking about brain differences.

4IR and the role that neurodiverse individuals play in the digital age

With the onset of the *4th Industrial Revolution (4IR)*, companies such as Apple, Google, Microsoft and SAP recognized that neurodiverse people play an essential role in the digital age; for example:

- **Autistic** brains are said to be highly creative with exceptional concentration, logic, imagination and visual thought. They also share unique insights and perspectives in problem-solving. Autism is common in the tech industry, far more than people might expect. Because of this, some major tech companies (as already mentioned above) are now actively engaged in encouraging even more neurodiversity, recognising its positive impact, not only on the work environment as such but also innovation and creativity and the products that emerge from this.
- **ADHD** people can hyper-focus, which means that while they generally have an attention deficit, they do have a strong focus on their area of interest – once again highly applicable to the tech industry. People with ADHD are also regarded as possessing a penchant for novel learning situations. Individuals along the autistic spectrum can be viewed in terms of their abilities with systems such as coding or mathematical computation.
- 84% of **dyslexic** people are above average in reasoning, understanding patterns, evaluating possibilities and making decisions. Their competencies are invaluable when it comes to viewing aspects from a broader perspective and assessing situations from multiple viewpoints. Dyslexics are also known for their excellent entrepreneurial skills.

(Source: WEF Whitepaper prepared by Nahia Orduna, Senior Manager in Analytics and Digital Integration, Vodafone)

Skills Development, neurodiversity and the 4IR

Organisations tend to overlook the fact that many neurodiverse people have extraordinary skills, including pattern recognition, memory and mathematical calculations. Organisations in the digital age face a talent challenge, while neurodiversity provides a new perspective and an untapped set of skills. With more cognitive diversity in our lives and work environment, organisations can become more creative and competitive if they are willing to recognise the “Silent 4IR talent”.

South African companies have a responsibility to provide life-long training opportunities to their employees. The 4IR actually offers us a fresh and unique opportunity to address youth unemployment by specifically adjusting our education models to upskill the next generation and catalyse innovation for digital transformation.

In conclusion

Let's embrace this 4IR where we all commit to striving for transformation, inclusive growth and job creation. South Africa now needs to draw on the strengths that we perhaps don't always fully appreciate having and to use these strengths to explore the new opportunities created by the fourth industrial revolution.

For businesses to prepare themselves, staff management within a changing work environment is important. To address these challenges, *SERR Synergy has developed training courses in innovation, communication* and enhancing the analytical skills of employees to take advantage of this new dispensation.

“People are too complicated to have simple labels.” (Philip Pullman)

About the author: Anita Seydel joined SERR Synergy in September 2014 and is currently the National Manager: Training and Development. She obtained her Honours in Public Administration at the University of South Africa (UNISA) and also holds six qualifications in the Education, Training and Development environment. She recently completed courses in Corporate Governance and Knowledge Management (UNISA), and Instructional Course Design (Wits University).

