

# ASSURING INCLUSION AND ACCESS

## INITIAL FOCUS ON NEURODIVERSITY PROVIDES LESSONS FOR EMBRACING AND LEVERAGING ALL FORMS OF DIVERSITY

BY **PETER TOMPKINS** AND **MARC HOMMEL**

The Institute and Faculty of Actuaries has recently established a new **Inclusion and Access Committee**, to be responsible for the development of the profession's Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) strategy and its concern for the profession focussing on diversity in all its dimensions. One of the areas on which we have focused is **neurodiversity**, an element of diversity on which every human sits. This recognises that we all think, feel, engage and sense in different ways; our brains and bodies are uniquely wired – and if we can better understand, respect and leverage our differences, we can both (1) alleviate challenges of misunderstanding, misinterpretation and exclusion and (2) create better outcomes for all of society, organisations and individuals.

**W**ithin neurodiversity, it is commonly thought that around 20% of humans are what is called '**neurodivergent**': relative to 80% thought of as being '**neuro-typical**'. Neuro-divergencies include conditions such as autism, ADHD and dyslexia. And neurodivergent people often find it extra-challenging to operate in a world designed for and by neurotypicals.

It is thought that the incidence of neuro-divergency (and, in particular, autism) is much higher in the actuarial profession than in the general population. In general, most (but not all) autistic people relative to the general population are significantly more numerate, skilled at seeing patterns, fast and intuitive – characteristics that lead us to choose and excel in the actuarial profession.

Many actuaries also work in industries that have high proportions of neurodivergent people. These include financial and professional services where the creativity and nous of dyslexic and ADHD people is (unknowingly) much valued.

Differences between and among us in terms of our neuro-wiring can present challenges. For example, we each have different sensitivities to senses encompassing not only the commonly known five (touch, hearing, smell, vision, taste) but also senses of intuition, empathy, space, balance, self and bodily needs (e.g. hunger, temperature). One person might need to listen to loud music in order to work effectively while another may need total silence and no competing noise in order to concentrate and be effective. One person may relish and thrive in crowded settings while another be petrified in this environment and operate much more effectively alone or in 1:1 interactions. One person might think it rude and cold to have screens off during on an online meeting while another might have deep anxiety about how they come across on screen. All of these people might have critically important skills and talents needed to manifest successful outcomes.

We see a lot of 'masking' both in our profession and in the spaces in which we work. This comes about because we commonly and understandably >

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## Initial focus on neurodiversity provides lessons for embracing all forms of diversity

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feel a need to put on a front in order to 'fit in', for connection and a sense of belonging, and because we naturally worry about how we present to clients, colleagues and superiors, all of whom can have an impact on both how we feel and on our career prospects and progression.

For many people, long-term masking results in burnout, relationship problems and mental ill health. And for many neuro-divergent people, these challenges often start at a young age, in the home, at school and other educational environments, and in the world of socialising and relationships.

Given the relatively high prevalence of neuro-divergency in our profession and the workplaces in which we operate, the Inclusion and Access Committee intends to review a number of aspects to inform actions we may wish to implement in the profession. We will be seeking views from across our stakeholders and welcome you letting us know if you'd like to contribute or participate in informing the debate. It's early days in our deliberations but the initial focus on neurodiversity has already helped us to recognise that, **across all forms of diversity**, we need to look within the profession at how we work with and across all diversities to:

- improve understanding, acceptance and engagement of the differences among us
- assure we are able to attract and develop talent from across all diversities rather than inadvertently excluding people who could contribute materially to our development and success
- communicate and engage with each other within the profession and with our stakeholders outside it

- educate, examine and assure professional quality and ability
- make and implement decisions that affect us all
- design work and event logistics, timings, places and spaces

We are considering holding workshops to enable our leaders, boards and committees to look closely at the behavioural attitudes inherent in the way in which work is conducted and opinions formed and implemented. We need to be building on the best qualities among diverse people and embracing and encouraging all of our members to achieve their full potential by making sure there are no unnecessary barriers.

Many of the world's most innovative advances have been achieved by people who would be classified as neuro-divergent – imaginative inventors, creative writers, artists and thinkers who advance our humanity and abilities in extraordinary ways. Each person, irrespective of their place within neurodiversity or -divergency, may well have beneficial skills that help to produce better outcomes within teams within both our profession and our workplaces.

Our hope is that over the coming months and years we be more inclusive of diversity **in all its forms**, helping people to avoid making harmful assumptions in favour of embracing differences for what they can bring to our abilities to provide better outcomes for ourselves and our clients, colleagues, fellow professionals and the world at large. <

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