

THE LIVED EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES OF NEURODIVERSITY PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS: A PLURALISTIC ANALYSIS

WALKER RAY DORNISCH
Royal Holloway, University of London

ANICA ZEYEN
Royal Holloway, University of London

SAMANTHA EVANS
Royal Holloway, University of London

ALMUTH MCDOWALL
Birkbeck, University of London

ABSTRACT

Although the success of neurodiversity programs is noted in existing literature, prior research has yet to empirically study the challenges of neurodiversity program administration. Furthermore, our understanding about those responsible for administering neurodiversity programs is limited, as neurodiversity programs have mostly been studied using the perspectives of neurodistinct employees, supervisors of neurodistinct employees, or the family members, support staff, and coworkers of neurodistinct employees. Therefore, this study was conducted using a pluralistic approach, with interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) and template analysis (TA), to explore the challenges of neurodiversity program administration, according to the perspectives of neurodiversity program administrators at large public companies in the United States. Three overarching themes and one integrative theme emerged: organizational culture for neuroinclusion, organizational resources, organizational structure, and executive sponsorship. The findings provide novel insights into what it is like to be a neurodiversity program administrator, what it means to them, their experiences with challenges, how they attempt to address challenges, and the factors that may contribute to neurodiversity program failure.

Keywords:

Neurodiversity; challenges; interpretative phenomenological analysis; template analysis; culture; resources; structure; executive sponsorship

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INTRODUCTION

The term neurodiversity refers to the naturally occurring differences in neurocognition of all people and the idea that there is no one “right” human brain (Baumer & Frueh, 2021; McDowall et al., 2024a). In management and organization studies, neurodiversity is defined as, “The diversity of ways in which human brains think, learn, relate to others and interpret the world” (Honeybourne, 2019, p. 18). This includes neurological and developmental differences (e.g., autism, dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) that diverge from the typical (Doyle, 2023). Neurodistinct individuals, described by Doyle (2020) as those “whose abilities and skills cross two or more standard deviations within the normal distribution” (p. 109), constitute approximately 15 – 20% of the global population (McDowall et al., 2024b; Moeller et al., 2021). This group (sometimes referred to as “neurominorities”), has experienced unemployment and underemployment rates as high as 85–90% (Doyle & McDowall, 2021; Krzeminska et al., 2019; Roux et al., 2015; Taylor & Seltzer, 2011).

Over the past decade, an increasing number of large public companies in the United States have identified neurodiversity as a source of competitive advantage to increase “diversity in skills, ways of thinking, and approaches to problem-solving” (Mahto et al., 2022, para. 1) within their workforces. Companies like Wells Fargo, Microsoft, and Dell have established neurodiversity programs that are open to all neurotypes (i.e., not specific to one neurotype such as Autism), to access the untapped talent pool of neurominorities (Austin & Pisano, 2017). These neurodiversity programs usually involve employee education about neurodiversity and making human resource policies more neuroinclusive (Hennekam & Follmer, 2024). Other practices may include skills-based job interviews (Krzeminska et al., 2019), reasonable workplace accommodations (e.g., assistive technology, flexible schedule, remote-work) (Patton, 2019), and job coaching (Hartman & Hartman, 2024; McDowall & Doyle, 2023). By doing so, neurodiversity programs endeavor to dismantle the disabling barriers that prevent neurodistinct people from fully participating in the labor market (Krzeminska & Hawse, 2020).

Several companies have observed positive outcomes as a result of their neurodiversity programs. According to Austin and Pisano (2017), managers at the software company SAP report improvements in reputation, productivity, innovation, and employee engagement. Similarly, JPMorgan Chase found that neurodiversity program hires were, on average, 90% to 140% more productive than their neurotypical counterparts (Furr, 2023; Ossola, 2021). Ernst & Young has one of the largest neurodiversity programs with 23 Neurodiverse Centers of Excellence globally, with a 92% retention rate of neurodistinct program hires and over \$1 billion in value creation since launching in 2021 (Carroll, 2024; EY UK, 2021). However, not all neurodiversity programs have been successful. One of the most notable examples of failure is FordWorks, the Ford Motor Company’s program for hiring autistic workers. The pilot program was deemed successful shortly after launching in 2016 (Westover et al., 2018). Over time though, updates became less frequent, and the program ceased to exist a few years later without any announcement or explanation.

To date, the relatively small body of past research on neurodiversity at work has primarily concentrated on the employment barriers for neurodistinct individuals, attitudes about neurodiversity, recruitment experiences, as well as the benefits and challenges of neurodiverse workplaces (Ali et al., 2024; Khan et al., 2023). Furthermore, neurodiversity programs have mostly

been studied at the individual-level, using the perspectives of neurodistinct employees (e.g., Flower et al., 2019), their supervisors (e.g., Waisman-Nitzan et al., 2019), as well as their family members, support staff, and coworkers (e.g., Hedley et al., 2018) (Annabi & Locke, 2019; Hedley et al., 2017). More broadly, neurodiversity at work research has relied on the perspectives of neurotypical employees (e.g., Morris et al., 2015) and subject matter experts (e.g., Tomczak, 2022; Tomczak et al., 2021). Unfortunately, our knowledge about neurodiversity programs at the organization-level remains extremely limited (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023). This might be due to a lack of prior research that includes the perspectives of employees at the administrative level, such as those responsible for leading neurodiversity programs. These perspectives could enrich our understanding of neurodiversity at work at the organization-level and perhaps explain why some neurodiversity programs are successful while others fail.

As such, this study endeavored to enhance our understanding of neurodiversity programs at the organization-level by examining the perspectives of their administrators. In doing so, we sought to establish a foundation for research inquiry into the challenges of neurodiversity programs, a subject of academic research that has been nearly nonexistent to date. Ultimately, to advance theory that could explain how and why neurodiversity programs fail. Such insights might explain why many companies on Disability:IN's Neurodiversity @ Work Roundtable, the world's largest consortium of employers with neurodiversity programs, are stagnant (Disability:IN, 2023). Accordingly, we posed the following research question: **Why do neurodiversity programs fail at large public companies in the United States?**

To answer this question, we: (1) explored the lived experiences of neurodiversity program administrators, with a focus on program challenges, and (2) investigated how these challenges are experienced by neurodiversity program administrators across different companies. We employed a two-stage, pluralist qualitative research design that integrates Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) and Template Analysis (TA). We conducted in-depth interviews with ten neurodiversity program administrators across eight large public companies in the United States. In stage 1, we used IPA to gain a comprehensive, within-case understanding of the lived experiences of administrators from the three largest programs in our sample. The findings (i.e., group experiential themes) from stage 1 served as the a priori themes for stage 2, wherein TA was applied cross-case to examine how challenges are experienced by different administrators in a variety of corporate contexts. This pluralistic, bottom-up, and participant-led approach enabled us to capture the idiographic depth of individual administrator experiences through IPA, as well as the broader thematic patterns associated with neurodiversity program administration through TA (Spiers & Riley, 2019). Our paper contributes to the corpus of literature by introducing the lived experiences of neurodiversity program administrators and identifying organization-level variables (i.e., organizational culture for neuroinclusion, organizational resources, organizational structure, executive sponsorship) that challenge neurodiversity program administration and help explain why they might fail.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Numerous practitioner-oriented outlets and case studies (e.g., Carrero et al., 2019; Krzeminska & Hawse, 2020; Pisano & Austin, 2016a, 2016b; Wareham & Sonne, 2008) highlight positive performance data of neurodiversity programs (e.g., number of annual hires, retention,

employee success stories). Yet, there is limited data about the challenges of neurodiversity programs. Impression management theory and prior research on corporate environmental reporting might suggest that the limited data is the byproduct of selective disclosure: the corporate practice of highlighting positive performance indicators to create a favorable public image while downplaying or hiding negative aspects (Diouf & Boiral, 2017; Marquis et al., 2016). In some instances, this could be the result of neurodiversity programs that are more superficial and symbolic in nature to enhance public image (Christensen et al., 2021). Prior research has shown that executives may deliberately opt for symbolic initiatives that signal commitment without significantly altering business practices (Dobbin & Kalev, 2017). This might partially explain why many neurodiversity programs lack sufficient resources to scale beyond pilot or experimental stages (Sniderman et al., 2023).

The divide between symbolic and substantive commitment, also known as decoupling, occurs when organizations adopt practices ceremonially to gain legitimacy but fail to embed them into core operations (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). MacLean and Behnam (2010) define decoupling as “symbolic gestures designed to give the appearance of satisfying regulatory requirements and enhance external audiences’ perceptions of organizational legitimacy while still allowing for ‘business as usual’” (p. 1499) (Weaver et al., 1999). In these situations, organizations create a “legitimacy facade”, the appearance of compliance that masks a lack of tangible implementation (MacLean & Behnam, 2010). Prior research on legitimacy theory (Ashforth & Gibbs, 1990; Suchman, 1995) suggests that initiatives framed through moral legitimacy (e.g., charity or social good) might not gain the pragmatic legitimacy required for resource prioritization (Carroll & Shabana, 2010). Consequently, initiatives such as neurodiversity programs may struggle and fail if symbolic support is not accompanied by substantive change (Bromley & Powell, 2012).

Recent literature has extended the concept of decoupling to include means–ends decoupling, which occurs when organizations implement formal policies or programs but do not achieve their stated objectives (Bromley & Powell, 2012; Wijen, 2014). In these cases, the divide is not between policy and practice, but between implementation and impact. For diversity programs in organizations, the challenge is identifying and establishing appropriate methods (i.e., means) to actualize outcomes (i.e., ends). For example, initiatives such as neurodiversity programs may be implemented primarily from a business case lens for opportunistic ends to capitalize on employee heterogeneity and maximize profit (Jayne & Dipboye, 2004). Likewise, initiatives such as neurodiversity programs may be implemented primarily from a social justice case lens for moral ends to increase equity, fairness, and impartiality (Byrd & Sparkman, 2022; Cohen, 2010; Killen, 2018). However, with either case, if the appropriate practices are not in place, the desired outcomes may not be reached.

Such practices may be resisted by employees, not due to active opposition to the purpose of the diversity initiative, but because of the taken-for-granted nature of organizational routines. According to institutional theory, long-standing organizational norms and practices become deeply embedded over time, shaping what is perceived as legitimate (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Scott, 2013). These routines become self-reinforcing and resistant to disruption (Sydow et al., 2009). This is partly because individuals have cognitive biases to preserve the status quo, even when it is disadvantageous (Jost & Banaji, 1994; Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988). For example, the traditional interview process, which prioritizes compliance with neurotypical social norms (e.g.,

handshake, eye contact, verbal skills), often disadvantages neurodivergent applicants and causes them distress (Davies et al., 2023). Common interventions, such as diversity training, provide only temporary positive effects and can have adverse effects that cause turnover, especially when it is compulsory (Dobbin & Kalev 2016).

Such resistance is especially common in mechanistic organizational structures, which rely on rigid hierarchies and highly formalized procedures (Burns & Stalker, 1994). Although designed for stability and efficiency, these structures can generate bureaucratic inertia that obstructs diversity initiative effectiveness (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). Empirical studies have shown that multi-layered bureaucracies diminish organizational agility and innovation capacity, ultimately undermining new initiatives that require quick adaptation (Verhoef et al., 2021). These inefficiencies are negatively associated with employee satisfaction and job performance (LePine et al., 2005, p. 765). The misalignment becomes particularly salient in risk-averse organizational cultures, where the prioritization of stability over change obstructs new initiatives (Brown & Osborne, 2013).

Some scholars argue that the adoption of new initiatives is strongly influenced by executive sponsorship. Although a lone “champion” can establish a diversity initiative, without embedding it into the organization’s fabric, their departure can precipitate its collapse (Howell et al., 2005). Champion theory (Howell & Higgins, 1990) cautions against relying on a single passionate leader without broader institutionalization. Likewise, Anthony et al. (2008) argue that initiatives are only sustainable when they move beyond individual heroics and become institutionalized through formal practices and substantive organizational support. Similarly, Kotter (1995) argues that transformation efforts fail when new behaviors and values are not anchored in the corporate culture. However, it is unknown in the corpus of literature whether, or to what extent, these theories apply to neurodiversity programs.

METHODS

IPA is an experiential and phenomenological qualitative method for understanding lived experiences and how individuals make sense of those lived experiences (Smith, 1996) concerned with the “essential structures of pure experiences and to the structures of sense that belong to these” (Husserl, 2001, p. 178). It is double hermeneutic, as the researcher makes sense of the participants’ sense making. The approach is deeply idiographic, case-by-case, to facilitate an in-depth examination of participants’ lifeworlds and shared themes across participants (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Consequently, the researcher is able to construct a narrative account that provides a rigorous, nuanced, and privileged “insider’s view” (Conrad & Barker, 2010, p. 71) into participants’ lived experiences (Smith et al., 1999). Despite increasing interest in neurodiversity at work, there are few neurodiversity programs in operation. Consequently, administrators, who we define as employees who oversee their companies’ neurodiversity programs, are scarce, and their experiences are likely to differ greatly given the bespoke nature of each program. For the first stage of the analysis, we used IPA because it is a well-established approach for achieving a highly detailed examination of subjective experiences and sense-making with complex topics, particularly in studies with smaller sample sizes (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2015).

While IPA is frequently used in psychology and health research, prior studies have also

applied it to understand how individuals interpret and respond to organization-level influences. This is exemplified by a growing and diverse body of studies addressing topics including fraud (Suh et al, 2020), workplace bullying (Hodgins & Mannix McNamara, 2017), gender practices (Sánchez de Miguel et al., 2015), identity threat (Wong et al., 2025), and venture failure (Cope, 2011). Such examples demonstrate that while IPA is grounded in individual experience, it can yield rigorous insights into interpretations of organization-level phenomena.

We combined IPA with a second analytic stage of TA to gain deeper insights about how challenges are experienced by administrators across various companies. This pluralistic approach is in line with Lamont and Swidler's (2014), who argue that combining multiple qualitative methods can more fully capture the complexity of social phenomena and address complex questions that would otherwise remain inadequately understood. TA is a form of thematic analysis for systematically organizing and analyzing textual data, typically in the form of interview transcripts (Brooks & King, 2014; Brooks et al., 2015). As demonstrated by the work of Turley (2011), the techniques can be used together, across two stages of empirical work, with IPA generating *a priori* themes for TA that are "grounded firmly in participants' own accounts rather than presuppositions about the topic" (Brooks et al., 2015, p. 214). An important component of TA is the development of a coding template which is a set of codes and themes, usually derived from a subset of the data. This coding template is then applied, revised, and reapplied to the data from epistemologically flexible positions (King, 2012).

Sample and Participant Recruitment

In accordance with the theoretical principles of IPA, participants were recruited by purposive sampling to create a small homogenous sample relevant to the research question (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014) to enable researchers to identify patterns across cases while preserving the particularities of individual participants (Smith, 1999). Since IPA is an ideographic method and less concerned with establishing claims for the broader population (i.e., generalizability), extant literature recommends the use of small sample sizes (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). TA is also used for small sample phenomenological studies where the research focus is to describe lived experiences in detail and progress analysis from the concrete to the abstract (King, 2008). Inclusion criteria required participants to be 18+ years of age, full-time employees of a public company headquartered in the United States, and administering their company's neurodiversity program as evidenced by their job title, as well as formal and informal job responsibilities. After ethical approval was received from the university of the lead author, participants were identified and contacted by email through a neurodiversity center at a university in the United States. This call produced a sample with an age bracket between 30 and 70. Three participants identified as female and seven identified as male. Nine participants identified as Caucasian and one participant identified as African American. All participants were university educated.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Data Generation

Consistent with prior IPA and TA studies, we conducted semi-structured interviews

(Eatough & Smith, 2017; Tabari et al., 2020). The flexible interview schedule had 29 questions based on a systematic literature review of prior IPA and TA studies, fieldwork with neurodiversity programs, and pilot interviews with one neurodiversity program administrator. We designed the questions to elicit a “conversation with a purpose” (Smith et al., 2021, p. 54), that focusses on how participants make sense of the respective neurodiversity program and their role (Smith, 2011a). Example questions included: “What are some of the challenges you’ve had with the neurodiversity program?”, and “In what ways has leading the neurodiversity program impacted you?” The interviews were conducted virtually using Microsoft Teams between February and May of 2024. Informed consent was obtained verbally at the beginning of the interviews. The interviews were audio and video recorded and lasted on average approximately 1 hour. Instead of financial compensation, ten trees were planted per participant as part of a reforestation program. The lead author transcribed the interviews verbatim and removed potentially personally identifying information. The second author audited the transcripts for accuracy.

ANALYSIS

Positionality and Reflexivity

The lead author has a professional background in business and an academic research focus in neurodiversity at work. He identifies as neurodistinct and disabled (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder). As a result, he has a familiarity with neurodiversity at work, both professionally and personally, that informs his perspectives. The second author specializes in research on disability inclusive spaces including work and entrepreneurship. She has lived experience of disability directly and through parenting a neurodistinct child. The third author has a professional interest in equality and diversity at work, though with no lived experience of neurodivergence. The fourth author is a senior academic who specializes in neuroinclusion, acts as a consultant to businesses, has been called on by government stakeholders for advice, and brings lived experience from their immediate family and work context.

We maintained a contextual constructivist epistemological position throughout our analysis, acknowledging that phenomena can have multiple interpretations which depend on the positions of the researchers as well as the research context (King, 2012; Madill et al., 2000). We remained reflexive throughout the analysis to promote transparency and trust in our findings (Adler, 2022; Dodgson, 2019). This involved a recurring process of internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of our positionality (Berger, 2015) through regular reflections, particularly on topics that elicited strong emotional reactions (Whiteman, 2010). For feedback, we regularly shared our findings with an independent committee of practitioners, academic researchers, and members of the neurodistinct community. The participants reviewed our findings to ensure their lived experiences were interpreted with integrity.

Stage 1: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

First, we used IPA for participants who represented 100 or more program hires as they represent the largest and most established neurodiversity programs of our sample ($n = 3$). We argue that these neurodiversity programs have extensive histories, functions, and expertise, which may be indicative of more complex administrator experiences and particularly rich interviews. We

analyzed the interview transcripts following the step-by-step approach suggested by Smith et al. (2021), informed by Smith's (1996) theoretical framework of IPA, Nizza et al.'s (2021) guidance for conducting high quality IPA, and the refined IPA terminology recommended by Smith & Nizza (2022). Through several steps of sustained engagement and interpretation of the interview transcripts, we sought to enter the personal and social life worlds of the participants, including the challenges of neurodiversity program administration.

In the first step, we read each transcript in its entirety multiple times and became immersed in the material. While reading, we made comments in the left margin to record our observations, reflections, thoughts, and statements of potential significance (i.e., exploratory notes) (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). In the second step, we re-read each transcript and used the right margin to transform our exploratory notes into experiential statements. We chose to approach each case as though it was the first to preserve the participants' unique perspectives rather than incrementally building our analysis. This approach reduced the risk of researcher presuppositions which is in keeping with Smith et al. (2021). By doing so, our aim was to more effectively illustrate the similarities (i.e., convergence) and differences (i.e., divergence) between participants without losing sight of idiosyncratic characteristics (Nizza et al., 2021).

Throughout this step, we continuously cross-referenced our exploratory notes and experiential statements with the transcripts to ensure that the connections between the participants' own words and our interpretations were apparent. In the third step, we used a separate document to create a list of the experiential statements and organized them chronologically. We then established connections between the experiential statements, clustering them according to their conceptual similarities, and assigning the clusters with descriptive labels that conveyed their conceptual nature. These clusters became personal experiential themes. We constructed a table of the personal experiential themes and the experiential statements that comprise them to create a case level summary. This process was repeated for each case.

After analyzing each case, we consolidated the case level summaries and identified cross-case personal experiential themes according to their presence in at least two-thirds of cases, their prevalence within the cases, the richness of the transcript extracts that articulated them, and the extent to which they exhibited other aspects of the cases (Smith et al., 2021; Smith & Osborn, 2008). We considered the cumulative length of time in which the cross-case personal experiential themes were discussed throughout the cases, a technique adapted from Noon (2018). We clustered the cross-case personal experiential themes into group experiential themes and organized them in a table.

We returned to each case and reviewed the initial materials (e.g., transcripts, exploratory notes, experiential statements, personal experiential themes), as well as the case level summaries, for any new data that could inform the group experiential themes. Lastly, we compiled the extracts from the case level summaries and selected those that best exemplified the group experiential themes (Smith & Osborn, 2008). In total, we identified three group experiential themes (Table 2): (1) corporate culture as a determinant of neurodiversity program implementability, (2) executive sponsorship as a determinant of neurodiversity program sustainability, (3) resource allocation as a determinant of neurodiversity program scalability. The group experiential themes from stage 1 served as *a priori* themes for stage 2.

Stage 2: Template Analysis (TA)

In stage 2, we analyzed the interview transcripts using a template approach described by Crabtree and Miller (1999), in a sequence of seven steps outlined by King et al. (2018), with the group experiential themes from stage 1 serving as the a priori themes. Following King (2012), these a priori themes were parsimonious and corresponded with the focus of the study. Throughout stage 2, we used the a priori themes tentatively and remained open to the possibility that they may need to be modified or even deleted as the coding template developed (King et al., 2002). We randomly selected three cases (case 5, case 8, and case 9), that were not used in stage 1, as our subset for preliminary coding. We coded any data that was relevant to our research questions or a priori themes. After completing the preliminary coding of our subset, we grouped emerging themes and a priori themes into clusters based on how they conceptually related to each other (King et al., 2019). The clusters were ordered hierarchically according to their level of thematic focus (e.g., broad, narrow) (Slade et al., 2009) to create a draft coding template. We reviewed the remaining transcripts with the draft coding template, amending it as necessary to capture relevant and important data. We continued to apply, modify, and reapply the draft coding template to every transcript until all pertinent data were incorporated and no further iterations were needed. In total, three themes and seven sub-themes were extracted (Table 2). A fourth theme that permeated the data, applied to many aspects of participant accounts, and could not be restricted to one grouping in the hierarchical thematic structure, was labeled as an “integrative theme” (King et al., 2002). We concluded the analyses by writing up our findings with extensive transcript excerpts, emphasizing description over synthesis, to share the participants’ accounts in their own words as much as possible (Slade et al., 2009).

[INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

FINDINGS

Organizational Culture for Neuroinclusion

Organizational culture for neuroinclusion was a prominent theme which can challenge neurodiversity programs by influencing how they are perceived and treated. Aspects of this challenge include the business case, not charity, awareness of neurodiversity, and divesting from the typical.

Business Case, Not Charity

The participants frequently experienced the misconception in organizational culture that neurodiversity programs are charity rather than a strategic business advantage. For example, according to administrator 8, a challenge with fostering an organizational culture for neuroinclusion is that “a lot of folks look at this as charity”. Employees from talent acquisition have approached him and the neurodiversity program from a “charitable mindset”. This is partly because “folks are driven by a tug at the heartstrings” and “charity is very much part of our [company] culture”. He believes that they “have to move away from that”. He argues that “ultimately, when push comes to shove, and getting money behind this, there really has to be a

strong business case”. To do so, he provides “education and awareness as to why this makes business sense to hire folks who are neurodivergent and the skills they offer”. He attempts to “convert” those that are “uninformed or misguided” about what the neurodiversity program does by explaining that the people they hire “are really strong in the areas of pattern recognition and analysis”. To enlighten others about the business case for the neurodiversity program, he believes that it is important to assess the “cultural appetite” for neurodiversity at work, engage with key stakeholders, share data, and “leverage any existing company functions” such as “professional development days”. He admits that even though he “may not be able to change everyone’s minds or hearts”, they are able to “do something that’s really great from a business standpoint and from a humanistic standpoint”.

These sentiments were echoed by other administrators, who address the misconceptions by presenting the neurodiversity program as a source for innovation. For administrator 5, fostering an organizational culture for neuroinclusion requires him to educate senior members of the company (i.e., “director level vice presidents”) about the advantages of neurodiversity at work. He “constantly” shares articles, data, and successes from other neurodiversity programs to “get them to understand that this isn’t charity”. He argues that if they want to continue being an innovative company and “think outside the box”, then they should “hire people who naturally think outside the box”.

For some administrators, such as administrator 1, correcting misconceptions requires continuous education about what neurodiversity at work is, what it is not, and the nature of the neurodiversity program itself. He assures employees that the neurodiversity program is “the same pay”, “the same benefits”, and “the same performance expectations”, not “charity” or “lowering the bar”.

Administrator 3 expands upon it by proposing that neurodiversity program hiring should not be viewed as an exception, but as a fundamental shift towards a more equitable and inclusive approach to recruitment. He often says “it’s important to highlight that this isn’t charity, this isn’t philanthropy, it’s not even DE&I”. From his perspective, “This is not, never was, and never will be some exception based backdoor into the company. This is a more accessible and considerate alternative front door, with a long-term commitment and an effort to consolidate those doors to be one door. One considerate, accommodating door, that is open wide enough for everybody to pass through”. For him, the neurodiversity program is a “more informed, mature, emotionally intelligent way to deal with human beings”.

Awareness of Neurodiversity

Lack of awareness about neurodiversity in corporate culture was another challenge experienced by administrators. For example, administrator 6 learned that they “should be openly talking about” having a neurodiversity program because some employees treated it as a “big secret and they didn’t want to talk about it”. These employees had good intentions but were “new” to neurodiversity and were “still learning what it is”. The “secrecy” was at odds with the “spirit behind the program”, which is “talking openly”, “celebrating the fact that we have this program”, and fostering an organizational culture for neuroinclusion where “we’re all in this together”. The “secrecy” prevented employees outside of the neurodiversity program from self-identifying or self-

disclosing as neurodistinct. From his perspective, “The more you talk about it, the more people can say, ‘Oh my gosh, that is me, you are talking about me. There are actually resources here at this large company that I didn’t know about that are available to me.’”

This lack of awareness even occurred in senior leaders engaged in other corporate diversity initiatives. For example, according to administrator 10, a director who was actively involved in a “number of other diversity networks” was unaware of neurodiversity until she had a student from the neurodiversity program “shadow her for the day”. Afterwards, the director told administrator 10, “Thank you for opening my eyes to a dimension of diversity that I did not know existed”.

Several administrators suggested that awareness of neurodiversity is a pre-requisite for introducing program hires to the workplace. According to administrator 4, an existing organizational culture for neuroinclusion is fundamental for a neurodiversity program. She believes that it is “really important” to foster an organizational culture for neuroinclusion prior to bringing “employees or interns actually on site”. From her perspective, one way of fostering this organizational culture for neuroinclusion is through “education and awareness” by training “recruiters”, “managers”, and “teams” about neurodiversity at work. She also suggests, “Looking at the recruiting process. Just making sure that it is accessible and free of bias.”

In many cases, increasing awareness of neurodiversity was credited with reducing bias, although it required a process of unlearning. To this point, administrator 5 notes that a lot of people have misconceptions about hiring neurodistinct employees, such as “expensive accommodations” or that “they’re going to be sick all the time”. He attempts to correct these misconceptions by raising awareness through education. “It’s a matter of getting the corporation to understand that the advantages outweigh the disadvantages, and it’s worth our while to go pursue this population.” He believes that education, and employee training, are solutions to raise awareness of neurodiversity that “break down the stigmas” which create “nervousness” around hiring neurodistinct employees.

If unaddressed, lack of awareness can disproportionately impact the daily work of program hires. For example, one of administrator 9’s first program hires was a “very social person” who “gets distracted a lot”. Initially, “her workstation was on the end cap of a main aisle” and “everybody who walked by going for coffee in the morning” would “stop and interact with her”. Eventually, people complained to administrator 9 by saying, “Oh my god, this isn’t working because she’s not paying attention.” Administrator 9 intervened. He recognized that since she was a naturally social person who is sensitive to distractions, “of course she was being distracted” by having a workstation in a high-traffic area of the office. Subsequently, he identified an “empty workspace” that was “off of the main track” where she would not be distracted. This “simple solution” was an “easy fix” to “put her in the right environment” and “help her be successful”.

Furthermore, the consequences from lack of awareness can be compounded in companies with multinational workforces. In the experience of Administrator 2 her company has “global teams” working across “different time zones”. A program hire “might be the only person in the United States” on a global team. Her perspective is that not “everyone has a full awareness of what neurodiversity is yet”, which has led to difficulties with people not fully understanding and respecting “different communication styles or workstyle preferences”. Although her company offers employee training for neurodiversity at work, it is “not necessarily mandatory for everyone”

to participate. From her perspective: “I think we can do a better job of educating team members, first and foremost, so that we can continue to promote that level of inclusion.”

Divesting from the Typical

Several administrators discussed the challenges of corporate cultures with deeply entrenched norms and practices. Administrator 3, a self-described “unapologetic disrupter”, believes that neurodiversity program challenges are the result of “disabling behaviors” caused by “uneducated bias” (i.e., “blind adherence” to the “way we typically do things”). He defines “uneducated bias” by pointing to the unwillingness of many to even push past any unconscious biases. From his perspective, “uneducated bias” is the “number one barrier” for the neurodiversity program. In his experience, reducing “uneducated bias” requires “divesting from the typical” “mindsets”, “behaviors”, “nomenclatures”, and “processes” that have historically existed. For example, the typical interview process is a common barrier for neurodistinct applicants and candidates. Recognizing this barrier, he and his company extensively revised the “typical interview process” for neurodistinct job applicants to create a new model of interviewing to “lower stress and anxiety” and “build psychological safety and trust”. He believes that this approach is more “accessible” and “considerate”. Applicants are not evaluated according to compliance with “social norms”, such as “verbal communication”, “eye contact”, and “a good firm handshake”. Instead, applicants “display their capabilities”, “competencies”, and “skills” in the form of skills-based assessment that corresponds with the responsibilities of the role for which they are applying.

However, rigid adherence to the established corporate culture can prove difficult to overcome. He observed that certain employees in the company, who are often “deeply tenured” and “deeply committed” to historical processes, are challenges for the neurodiversity program. His perspective is that these employees adhere strictly to the “longstanding interpretations” of what their role entails. These employees “rely on what they have always done to define what they will do”. They resist collaborating with the neurodiversity program because they believe that it’s not part of their job. For example, they may claim that updating “job descriptions” is the responsibility of “human resources”. These employees tend to remain inflexible, even when educated about what the neurodiversity program does and how it works.

However, introducing nontraditional practices can prompt outcry and resistance among employees. Administrator 9 spoke about the challenges of divesting from the typical to foster an organizational culture for neuroinclusion. In his experience, the neurodiversity program was initially a “culture shock” because they “weren’t 100% selecting employees”. Instead, they were “having some external assistance”. Employees responded to this “cultural change” by saying, “Oh my God, we’re changing something. Why are we changing something that we think has worked?” His perspective is that they should be “looking for reasons to say yes, not reasons to say no”, as they have done historically. To accomplish this, he would tell those involved in the hiring process, “Don’t worry about how someone answers the question. Don’t worry about eye contact. Don’t worry that they may have a delay in processing.”

Despite best efforts to divest from the typical, administrator 1 continues to observe the prevalence of “unconscious biases” in interviews. Despite interviewers being trained not to expect typical behaviors, such as “how you shake that hand or look in the eye”, he is aware that they

continue to do so anyway.

Organizational Resources

Organizational Resources captured how organizational resources, specifically concerning budget and headcount, can challenge neurodiversity programs and can dictate their sustainability and scalability. These findings suggest that because of organizational resources, neurodiversity programs may struggle to operate properly.

Budget

The administrators consistently identified budgetary constraints as a challenge for neurodiversity programs. Budgetary constraints were a particular challenge for administrator 2. Structurally, she works within “human resources, talent acquisition”. She oversees “all of the hiring” for the neurodiversity program. She also manages the “support resources” (i.e., accommodations) for the neurodiversity program hires, such as job coaches. She further explains: “However, we have tons of people at the company that didn't get hired through this program that are neurodivergent, myself included, that might benefit from working with a coach or might benefit from other types of resources that we offer through the program. What I'm running into is I only have a certain amount of budget to dedicate to those coaches and I forecast that based off of how many hires I expect to have year after year or how many people are in the program. Therefore, if someone from outside of the program says, ‘Hey, I want a career coach’, I'm running into challenges with how do I fund that?” As a neurodistinct employee, she uses accommodations (e.g., “assistive technology”) for her daily work. She understands the importance of accommodations for neurodistinct employees and perceives job coaching as “really valuable”. Although she “loves” that they offer job coaching to neurodiversity program hires, she doesn't have the available budget to offer it as a standard accommodation that anyone can request like a “standing desk or noise cancelling headphones”. She acknowledges that this is one of her “biggest pain points” and that a “much larger” and “centralized” budget is needed for company-wide adoption.

This organizational dependency on decentralized funding models further challenges the neurodiversity programs. For example, administrator 8 has witnessed the value of coaching and would like to offer it to all neurodiversity program hires. He states, “I pitched it to our steering committee a couple quarters ago, and they seem to like it”. Yet, he admits that “the question is, who's going to pay for it? It's really going to be who has the budget”. Ultimately, they agreed that the “business group that participates in this program, they're really going to have to fund that expense”. He anticipates that this “additional expense” will present challenges for the neurodiversity program though, because it “could be a disincentive for them to be involved”. He acknowledges that “trying to pitch that to various business groups who would be funding it, if they participate in this program, that's going to be a hard sell”.

In some cases, the absence of a centralized and sufficient budget at the organization-level resulted in administrators relying on informal funding mechanisms to sustain their neurodiversity programs. Administrator 5, for instance, funds employee education and training about neurodiversity from a budget allocated to a different line of business within the company. Although

he invites “all the people in the space to that training”, he is concerned about future funding, asking “who funds that in the future, from a corporate perspective?”. From his perspective, “Global Diversity Inclusion doesn’t have a budget for that” and won’t help fund the neurodiversity program unless it’s “deemed important enough at the corporate level”. According to administrator 5, the neurodiversity program is seen as “not worth the bang for the buck”. He admits that there are “all kinds of people” who want to help “but they don’t hold the purse strings” and he needs “some funding to run this program”. Consequently, he is “frustrated” and feels like a “lone voice in the dark”. He recognizes that because of funding and other challenges, the program will likely fail if he retires soon. In his own words: “I gotta get this program on track and going before I leave because it will fail if I walk away in its current state.”

Multiple administrators acknowledged the substantial costs of sustaining neurodiversity programs but drew attention to the long-term financial and cultural returns. Administrator 6 recognizes that there are “a lot of costs around” the neurodiversity program and that they “invest heavily in our internship population”. However, when the interns “come back year over year, it is very beneficial to us”. He elaborates by stating, “When they perform well on the contracts, they’re performing well for our customers, which obviously is very financially beneficial for us. So there’s a lot of financial benefits to it. But we’re also seeing that we are changing the culture and the expectations internally, which is equally as important.”

Other administrators stressed the importance of making operating costs more transparent to mitigate resistance. Administrator 1 advises companies on the expenses of having a neurodiversity program. He thinks that “demystifying the cost is important”. For example, “job coaching” is not expensive if a company only hires “two or three people”. However, it can become expensive if a neurodiversity program scales. Likewise, hiring consultants to help create the neurodiversity program “does cost” and there can be “sticker shock for folks initially”. From his perspective though, the “biggest” and “truly real, meaningful cost” is the neurodiversity program administrator and the “people to work on this” either “full-time” or “part-time”.

In contrast, administrator 10 argues that neurodiversity programs do not need to be resource intensive. He approaches the neurodiversity program “from the lens that you don’t have to have a huge budget or huge staff dedicated to this”. He recognizes that some companies “do it big, do it bold, with a team of folks behind them and that is amazing”. His perspective is that companies are dissuaded from creating neurodiversity programs because they believe it requires a dedicated budget and staff like Wells Fargo. These companies tell him, “We don’t have X budget, X staff, so we can’t do this”. He argues that these companies are mistaken when they “are going down this path”.

Headcount

In addition to budgetary constraints, headcount constraints were also recognized as a challenge for neurodiversity programs. For administrator 1, headcount is “probably the biggest thing that impedes the program”. As an administrator and mentor to other neurodiversity programs, he has witnessed that executives will only “give you headcount to start a program”. From his perspective, to sustain and grow, the neurodiversity program must compete with other corporate groups for a finite amount of headcount. In his own words: “You’re always competing for

headcount, right? Other groups, right? Every year, right? You only have so many heads and you've got other programs. You've got military programs, diversity programs, apprenticeship programs - there's all these programs. So you've got to be able to get allocated heads for your program. Five heads, three heads, ten heads, twenty heads. That's how you grow your program." Even though "everyone usually wants to grow" the neurodiversity program, they are constantly challenged by the availability of headcount. In addition, external factors such as the "pandemic" or "a tech downturn" can decrease the amount of available headcount that corporate groups are able to compete for, making it more difficult for the neurodiversity program to grow. From his perspective, this an ongoing challenge for even the largest and most successful neurodiversity programs. In his opinion: "If you take a step back, and you look at all these companies who I think are best in class: Wells Fargo, E&Y, Dell. 300 – 400 neurodivergent hires, right? What constrains you is the headcount. So I think, I think that's a challenge. I think that's a challenge for any company - that headcount piece to really grow." He suggests that instead of competing for headcount, the focus should be on the "1000s of people that are neurodivergent" and already employed by the company. He believes that this is how "you can have true scale" and "truly make an impact".

However, even when neurodiversity programs are able to obtain requisitions, they may struggle to secure the necessary internal organizational support to fill them. For example, administrator 5 requests requisitions from his "fellow directors" but he doesn't "want it forced on people" because "the best way to fail is to force it on somebody if they're not going to be very inclusive, perhaps not engaging". For instance, if the hiring manager is resistant, such as an "old crotchety guy", they may say, "I don't want to waste my time on an accommodation". Therefore, the struggle for administrator 5 is securing requisitions, while also finding hiring managers who are "champions" and willingly volunteer to "take on the challenge of hiring a neurodivergent" employee. Unfortunately, from his perspective, "not a lot of folks are raising their hands". Furthermore, even with a requisition and appropriate hiring manager, administrator 5 still has to find a qualified neurodistinct candidate. His options are to either work with an external hiring organization, such as "Specialisterne", which are "not cheap" and require "very high cost", or collaborate with talent acquisition. However, when he approaches talent acquisition directors for assistance, they respond by saying that they have "15 other groups to staff, fund, support, go to conferences, and you're a little, small piece". He recalls that a member of the talent acquisition team claimed, "I'm going to these conferences with hundreds of people looking to work for [case 5 company], your five is not worth my time." He has also been told by the talent acquisition director that "we're just too busy doing other stuff. We got a million things on our plate." Consequently, administrator 5 is not always able to fill requisitions. With five requisitions for summer 2024, he was only able to get two.

In contrast, headcount constraints can obstruct neurodiversity programs even in companies with strong candidate pipelines. Administrator 6 further explains that the "challenge of our job every day" is balancing "what we have available workwise and the candidates". His role is in talent acquisition and there's "typically no shortage of qualified candidates that we can go out and find that would be interested". He spends a lot of time on calls with "four or five" coworkers, "trying to problem solve" to "help everybody get through". Demand exceeds supply though, and according to administrator 7 qualified candidates may be turned away because they "just happen to be full at the moment".

In some cases, external market conditions exacerbate headcount constraints by halting hiring altogether. Administrator 8 is unable to hire because of market conditions. Due to a "hard market" in 2023, the company "laid off 6% of its workforce" (i.e., "about 2000 folks"). The company is "a very financially conservative company" and implemented a "hiring frost". From his perspective, "If we had a hard time hiring people into the program in 2023, it's really going to be hard this year [2024]". He further explains that, "it's hard to keep the momentum going when you can't hire". For him, "the frustration comes in the challenges that we're not hiring and we can't continue to iterate and refine". He continues by saying, "There's only so much kind of internal cultural work we can do. I feel like we're over rotating".

Organizational Structure

Organizational Structure captured how processes and procedures, and bureaucracy, can challenge neurodiversity programs. These findings suggest that because of organizational structure, neurodiversity programs may struggle to be effective.

Processes and Procedures

The administrators identified corporate processes and procedures within the organizational structure as considerable challenges for neurodiversity programs. Administrator 8 has experience with employees who were "really struggling" to reconcile the neurodiversity program with "corporate processes and procedures". Since his company is "such an anti risk-based business", they have to "mitigate risk processes and procedures", which makes employees "really not subject to being flexible". For example, there have been "a lot of leaders in the company, who were involved with the program, who weren't as flexible" with "modifying the day-to-day core functions of the job". Because the company is "very particular about its processes and procedures, there isn't a lot of wiggle room" with "how stuff gets done". In addition, administrator 8 admits that certain processes, such as accommodations, can be "very complicated", "burdensome", and "scary" for neurodivergent employees. In the past, his company has "struggled" with making the accommodations process more "employee centric", "candidate centric", "inclusive of other communication styles", and less "transactional". They learned to take a "real honest assessment" of their processes and "get a baseline of what employees are thinking". For example, his company assessed the therapists in their employee assistance program to determine whether they were qualified to work with neurodivergent employees who have "co-occurring mental health" conditions.

Administrators also spoke about how such processes and procedures, which are typically developed without considering neurodiversity, can unintentionally marginalize program hires. For example, administrator 2 feels that corporate processes can be unclear and difficult to navigate, which impacts all employees, but disproportionately affects those that are neurodivergent. For example, if "autistic team members" would like "mental health resources", they should "be able to go to our employee assistance program and say, 'Hey, I really want a therapist that has worked with someone who's autistic before or even specializes in it.'" In her experience though, she has "not seen that to be a very clear or easy process". She believes that "really clear processes within organizations on how to access those resources" are needed. Furthermore, she is "really struggling" with CEO mandates, such as return-to-office after the COVID-19 pandemic, that "force someone to go in and sit under terrible fluorescent lights in an area where everyone around you is talking".

She says, “I really, really worry about how that’s going to impact some of our team members.” From her perspective, these broad executive-level decisions do not consider people with “sensory differences”. They’re “not setting people up for success and therefore you’re going to not do as great of business”. She states, “I’m not sure that we are cognizant enough of some of the needs of the neurodivergent community when it comes to the way that these offices are set up. Sure, we have a quiet room, but does someone want to sit in a quiet room all day? What’s the point of coming in if they’re going to be in a quiet room? Speaking from experience, myself.” “So many” of her program hires have approached her about the mandates and expressed their frustration. Although she does her best to accommodate them, she is “only one person” and she “can’t make a lot of those decisions that [the CEO] is making about going back in”. She concludes by saying, “I worry about long term growth and expectations when we’re really pushing for more of that in person experience”.

Bureaucracy

The administrators reported that the bureaucracy of organizational structure challenges neurodiversity programs. For example, administrator 5 understands that his company “is a huge corporation, huge corporations can have big bureaucracies”. Part of the problem is that the company has “different processes for each business area” and it is not “like one group of corporate handles all the business areas”. Instead, each business area has “separate staff and different processes”. From his perspective, “something seemingly simple” can take a long time to change, sometimes years, because of bureaucracy. For example, when he asks “human resources for something specific that requires change, it’s going to go to the highest levels of the organization.” He expresses his “frustration” with “how slow things happen in big organizations”. He wonders how they can “change the bureaucracy” so that they are “leading the charge, not playing catch up ball” with competitors. As “one director in one line of business” though, he doesn’t “have that much influence across” the company. He reiterates his “frustration” with the difficulties but insists he will “keep grinding away” and “shake a lot of trees” to make the neurodiversity program successful before he retires.

Similar dynamics were experienced across industries as administrators expressed their frustrations with the slow rates of growth caused by bureaucracy. In particular, administrator 8 expressed his “frustrations” with the firm being “very slow to change” and the inability to “hire more than the eight people” they hired in 2022. He states, “I’m from the East Coast. I feel like I’m not being as effective if I’m not getting something done every single minute. But our culture here at [case 8 company] doesn’t work that way. Things move slowly. You have to be patient and move at the pace of the company”. He argues that making organizational culture “more neuroinclusive” is a “huge undertaking” from “a change management standpoint”, especially when the company is “not very flat” and “not very flexible”.

For a few administrators, bureaucracy is especially salient during periods of organizational restructuring when the continuity of support for program hires is disrupted. From the perspective of administrator 1 “most companies are very intentional” about selecting managers for their neurodiversity programs. However, if a “good manager” who has “gone through the training” and wants “to be part of the program” leaves the company because of a corporate reorganization, a neurodiversity program hire might be reassigned to a manager who was not selected by the

neurodiversity program. The neurodiversity program hire no longer has the same relationship with their manager which, in many instances, was cultivated over several years. Although corporate reorganization affects “any employee, even if you’re not neurodivergent”, it can be an especially “tough time” for neurodiversity program hires if the new manager is not “leaning in” and making “that connection”. In such instances, “all of a sudden, a well performing employee that came through our program is now struggling”. Often, by the time he learns about the problem, “it’s too late” and the neurodiversity program hire leaves the company. He does not “get notified” and “there’s no flag in the system” to alert him when a neurodiversity program hire has a new manager in need of training. In large companies, there are “hundreds of people” in the neurodiversity programs. These companies “don’t tag and track people that way”. In addition, the neurodistinct employees usually don’t “self-advocate and reach back out”. From his perspective, “It’s easy when you’ve got five people to know how they’re doing because you know them all but as you grow, that doesn’t happen”. He confesses that this ongoing challenge is “not easy to solve”. It “baffles” and “hurts” him.

Executive Sponsorship

Executive Sponsorship was an integrative theme which captures the role of executive sponsorship with neurodiversity program challenges such as organizational culture for neuroinclusion, organizational resources, and organizational structure. The findings suggest that although executive sponsorship can impact organizational culture for neuroinclusion and organizational resources, it cannot impact organizational structure. However, organizational structure can impact executive sponsorship which in some cases, can cause programs to fail.

Executive sponsorship was emphasized as a crucial organization-level variable to raise awareness of neurodiversity and foster an organizational culture for neuroinclusion. For administrator 3, part of the value of executive sponsorship is their willingness to openly express their “commitment” and talk about “neurodiversity in their town halls”. By doing so, the executives share the “cultural impacts” of the neurodiversity program to raise awareness. Consequently, the executives encourage an organizational culture for neuroinclusion that is more knowledgeable about neurodiversity and receptive to the neurodiversity program. From his perspective, the executive support is analogous to the “viable runway” of an airport that enables the administrator (i.e., “pilot”), to successfully direct the neurodiversity program.

However, administrators made a clear distinction between the symbolic support and meaningful involvement of executive sponsorship, especially concerning organizational resources. Administrator 5, for example, does not have a “corporate level executive to push the program”. The neurodiversity program is part of an employee resource group, which has executive sponsorship from “the CEO of the corporation” and an “executive vice president”. These executives “want to see this program expanded but they have not asked him yet to direct that at the corporate level”. Consequently, he is “frustrated” by ongoing conversations and a lack of action. From his perspective, “lots of people have lots of good intentions”, however, “you can pretend to care, but you can’t pretend to show up”. He questions, “Where are the talent acquisition people? The global diversity and inclusion people? The executives that think it is a great idea?” He is “trying to build this program at the director level with vice president support” but the “hard thing is getting an executive vice president level person to say, ‘Yes, this is an official program that the company is supporting’”. What he needs is “somebody at a high level to say, ‘this is important

enough for me to put my name on it, make it happen dammit””. Ideally, he would like a Vice President to “put somebody senior in charge” and say “here’s the funding, do whatever [administrator 5] says””. Instead of receiving “just guidance”, he wants “better executive sponsorship” to direct the “talent acquisition organization and global diversity and inclusion organization to make it work”. He wants to “get this done” because he is “probably going to retire next year”. However, he “can’t necessarily disclose” his intention to retire, otherwise, in his own words, “they’ll just wait me out, maybe”.

Even with the meaningful involvement of executive sponsors, administrators noted that organizational structure can determine how, or whether, such executive sponsorship is impactful at the organization-level. Administrator 2 attributes executive involvement in the employee resource group, and their recognition of the need for a neurodiversity program, as the basis for the creation of the neurodiversity program. She notes that the executives continue to be involved with the neurodiversity program and that one of her responsibilities is to meet with them on a “regular basis”. Her perspective is that this “level of engagement” is valuable because managers are more inclined to volunteer and support the neurodiversity program “if you have executives that are passionate about this”. However, she has learned from experience that the organizational structure can moderate the benefits of executive support. In this regard, she states that, “Things in the corporate world, they don't happen overnight. I can't just turn on a switch and now when everyone applies to a job, they can request a skills-based interview. Like on our job application, changing the whole application, that's going to take a whole review process that will go through 12 different levels and probably be turned down 25 times.”

Furthermore, major alterations to the organizational structure, such as the departure of an administrator or executive sponsor, can leave neurodiversity programs without an organizational champion and at greater risk of stagnation or dissolution. In the experience of administrator 1, executive sponsorship is critical for the survival of a neurodiversity program when the administrator leaves the company. According to him: “A lot of companies just stagnated, right? Whether it's VMware, Ford, or Qualcomm - all good intentions. But what happens is, leadership changes and the point person who's leading it leaves, right? If there's not executive buy-in and they're not really committed to this then when that one person leaves, the thing just stops.” From his perspective, executive sponsorship is necessary to ensure that the neurodiversity program continues after the departure of an administrator otherwise “the thing just falls down”. In addition, a “hierarchical restructure or remapping” that results in the departure of executive sponsors can cause it to fail. He believes that the departure of an administrator, coupled with insufficient executive sponsorship and embeddedness in the organizational culture, or the departure of the executive sponsor themselves, constitute “75-80%” of failed neurodiversity programs. He believes that this is the reason why there are many companies on Disability:IN’s Neurodiversity @ Work Roundtable that have become “stagnant” after only a “few months or years” (Disability:IN, 2023).

DISCUSSION

This study engaged with the lived experiences and challenges of neurodiversity program administrators, providing valuable insights into the organization-level factors that may contribute to neurodiversity program failure. We interpreted three overarching themes and one integrative theme: organizational culture for neuroinclusion, organizational resources, organizational

structure, and executive sponsorship. We now discuss our findings vis-a-vis contributions to theory and further research as well as implications to practice.

Organizational Culture for Neuroinclusion

Our findings reveal a common mischaracterization of neurodiversity programs as charity, rather than a strategic business advantage. While seemingly well-intentioned, the mischaracterization devalues the potential contributions of neurodistinct program hires and diminishes the perceived importance of neurodiversity programs within organizations. The mischaracterization is further reinforced by stigmas surrounding neurodiversity, such as assumptions that neurodistinct employees are more costly, less productive, and exhibit higher rates of absence. Consequently, this can create resistance that hinders their widespread corporate adoption and limits the degree of investment they receive (e.g., budget, headcount). Even in companies with active neurodiversity programs, insufficient awareness about neurodiversity may persist. This insufficient awareness can be systemic, extending throughout business units and hierarchical levels, which inadvertently reinforces bias within the organizational culture. Such bias may decrease the performance of neurodiversity program hires and increase the likelihood of misunderstandings. These misunderstandings can be exacerbated in companies with globally dispersed workforces due to disparities in cultural interpretations of neurodiversity. Although neurodiversity programs offer employee education and training to raise awareness, often it is not mandatory for employees. However, even when mandatory, adherence to traditional corporate practices (e.g., processes, expectations, responsibilities) can continue to create barriers for both neurodiversity programs and program hires. Employees might question or resist changes to traditional corporate practices by neurodiversity programs because they are accustomed to and satisfied with them, have long tenures at the company, or are rigid with their interpretations of role responsibilities. In this case, adherence to traditional practices may persist not due to superiority, but because they have accrued legitimacy through repetition and familiarity. Strong executive sponsorship was credited with addressing these challenges, fostering an organizational culture for neuroinclusion, and generating organization-wide engagement for the neurodiversity programs.

Organizational Resources

Despite substantial evidence demonstrating the financial benefits of neurodiversity program hires, and strong internal support for neurodiversity programs among employees, organizational resource constraints remain a persistent challenge for administrators. The absence of adequate centralized corporate budgets, coupled with intense competition for limited headcount with other specialized hiring programs, can restrict the sustainability and scalability of neurodiversity programs. Neurodiversity program administrators, in this context, depend upon other internal units and decision-makers to secure funding and headcount. The administrators have little formal authority to influence resource allocation decisions, which are also susceptible to external factors such as economic downturns. Consequently, administrators are forced to make difficult decisions about their available resources (e.g., coaching, employee education), often prioritizing program hires and potentially exacerbating workplace inequities by marginalizing neurodistinct employees recruited through traditional hiring processes. In some cases, administrators divert funds from other business units, a form of cross-subsidization, to compensate for financial deficits and meet employee demand for support resources, regardless of program

affiliation. Although both privileged access to support resources and the diversion of funds are neither equitable nor sustainable, requiring individual business units to absorb the costs may make them reluctant to participate if they do not perceive direct benefit. Without meaningful executive sponsorship to champion the neurodiversity program at the organization-level and address these challenges, programs risk being under-resourced.

Organizational Structure

Confusing, complex, and inflexible processes and procedures can present barriers for neurodiversity programs. These barriers, combined with rigid hierarchies and slow-decision making, can significantly undermine programs. For example, administrators report difficulty with navigating internal resources, such as mental health support for program hires. Even seemingly simple requests are often subject to considerable delays. Subsequently, there appears to be a misalignment between the mission of the programs and the nature of the organizational structures, where the needs of the organizations take precedence over the needs of the programs. Even programs with strong executive sponsorship can still be susceptible to organizational structure challenges. Whereas executive sponsorship can be vital for the survival of a program when an administrator leaves the company, if the executive sponsor leaves due to an organizational restructuring, a program might fail. *Therefore, it is plausible that the majority of programs fail due to the departure of program administrators, coupled with a lack of executive sponsorship and embeddedness in the organizational culture, or simply the departure of the executive sponsors themselves.* This finding extends the literature on organizational change by demonstrating that while executive sponsorship is critical for navigating challenges with organizational culture for neuroinclusion and organizational resources, it can also lead to program failure from organizational structure. In this regard, those who are most responsible for neurodiversity program success are also most responsible for neurodiversity program failure.

LIMITATIONS & FUTURE RESEARCH

Although this study offers valuable insights into the lived experiences and challenges of neurodiversity program administration, there are limitations outside of our control that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the purposive sampling method, while appropriate for IPA and TA, introduces the risk of self-selection bias that could affect the representativeness of the sample. The willingness of administrators to participate in this study might have been influenced by exceptional experiences with neurodiversity program success or failure, potentially skewing the sample towards those with either highly positive or highly negative experiences, that may not necessarily reflect the typical administrator experience. Future research could incorporate multiple data sources (e.g., interviews, observations, documents), for triangulation, to capture a variety of perspectives and enhance the trustworthiness of findings (Carter et al., 2014; Scandura & Williams, 2000). Second, it is possible that the data was impacted by social desirability bias because of the administrators' roles in large, public companies in the United States. Despite being provided with a detailed information sheet that outlined the study's ethical standards, participant rights, and anonymity, the administrators may have presented their experiences in a manner to avoid negative portrayals of their companies or themselves. Consequently, the findings might underrepresent the full extent of their experiences with program challenges, producing an incomplete depiction of neurodiversity program administration. We suggest that future research

consider strategies to mitigate social desirability bias, such as indirect measures and computer-administered surveys with no identifying information (Fisher, 1993; Podsakoff et al., 2003).

CONCLUSION

Our study offers novel empirical insights into the lived experiences of neurodiversity program administrators and the organization-level variables that contribute to neurodiversity program challenges and potential failures. Our findings reveal that the success or failure of neurodiversity programs is not solely determined by their efficacy, but rather their fragility to organization-level variables outside administrator control. Most notably, organizational culture for neuroinclusion, organizational resources, and organizational structure. These findings contribute to broader discourse surrounding the gap between corporate policy and practice, demonstrating how programs designed to support marginalized groups can remain mostly symbolic without executive sponsorship. Moreover, this study uniquely contributes the lived experiences of neurodiversity program administrators to the corpus of literature, which has been overlooked in prior research. Their perspectives offer an indispensable lens for investigating both the promise and precarity of neurodiversity programs in contemporary business. Our hope is that this study will inspire future researchers to leverage the lived experiences of neurodiversity program administrators, to advance the field's theoretical understanding, and inform practitioners of effective strategies for achieving neurodiversity program success.

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Table 1: Participant Demographics						
Case/Administrator	Company Sector	Company Industry	Gender	Age Bracket	Ethnicity	Education
1	Technology	Computer Software: Prepackaged Software	Male	50-60	Caucasian	Bachelors
2	Technology	Computer Manufacturing	Female	30-40	Caucasian	Bachelors
3	Finance	Major Banks	Male	50-60	Caucasian	Bachelors
4	Consumer Discretionary	Air Freight/Delivery Services	Female	30-40	African American	Bachelors
5	Industrials	Military/Government/Technical	Male	60-70	Caucasian	Masters
6*	Industrials	Industrial Machinery/Components	Male	40-50	Caucasian	Bachelors

7*	Industrials	Industrial Machinery/Components	Female	30-40	Caucasian	Bachelors
8	Finance	Investment Bankers/Brokers/Service	Male	40-50	Caucasian	Masters
9*	Finance	Property-Casualty Insurers	Male	60-70	Caucasian	Bachelors
10*	Finance	Property-Casualty Insurers	Male	40-50	Caucasian	Bachelors

*NOTE: Cases 6 and 7 are co-administrators in the same company. Likewise, cases 9 and 10 are co-administrators in the same company.

Table 2: Stage 1 and Stage 2 Themes			
Stage 1	Stage 2		
<i>Group Experiential Theme*</i>	<i>Theme</i>	<i>Subtheme</i>	<i>Integrative Theme</i>
Corporate Culture as a Determinant of Neurodiversity Program Implementability	Organizational Culture for Neuroinclusion	Business Case, Not Charity Awareness of Neurodiversity Divesting from the Typical	Executive Sponsorship**
Resource Allocation as a Determinant of Neurodiversity Program Scalability	Organizational Resources	Budget Headcount	
	Organizational Structure	Processes and Procedures Bureaucracy	

Executive Sponsorship as a Determinant of Neurodiversity Program Sustainability**			
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*The group experiential themes from stage 1 served as the a priori themes for stage 2.

**The group experiential theme “Executive Sponsorship as a Determinant of Neurodiversity Program Sustainability” from stage 1 became the integrative theme “Executive Sponsorship” in stage 2.