

What do line managers know about the opportunities and challenges facing neurodivergent people in relation to career development and progression?

ABSTRACT

Drawing on a socio-relational approach to disability, the career experiences of eleven autistic employees and thirteen line managers are explored, using semi-structured interviews and questionnaires conducted within the qualitative paradigm. Findings indicate that ableist HRD practices, social constructions of skill and disability made by decision makers and managers represent socio-cultural impositions which shape career experiences for autistic people. This paper extends knowledge about the career challenges facing neurodivergent people which appear in promotion processes and leadership development programmes. Career development experiences are also shaped by the views and approach to inclusivity on the part of line managers. It also shows that autistic employees have doubts about their skills and are unsure about career progression towards a management role. The paper calls for greater knowledge and understanding of the ways in which neurodivergent employees can contribute, by advancing leadership development experiences and career progression practices which serve this population better.

KEYWORDS

neurodivergence, neurodiversity, line managers, careers, development, hidden disabilities

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INTRODUCTION

About 15–20% of the global population is neurodivergent (Doyle 2020) yet still experience persistently low employment rates and discriminatory outcomes, despite protections from equalities legislation. Turning to autism, a particular neurodivergent condition, the employment rate for autistic people is 30%, in comparison to about 50% for all disabled people (DWP, 2024). Just under half of employed autistic adults report being over-educated for their role (Baldwin et al., 2014), working in low-wage jobs (Roux et al., 2015) and only a third of autistic graduates employed in roles reflecting their qualifications (Vincent & Ralston, 2023). Such employment impacts job satisfaction, skill development and earnings prospects, thus reducing opportunities for longer-term career development and success. Knowing that autistic people have skills which employers could harness productively (Ovaska-Few, 2018; Austin & Pisano, 2017) should encourage organisations to support careers, yet skilled autistic people rate their managers' ability to support their careers lower than do their managers, (Richards et al., 2023), suggesting there is room for change. Neurodivergent people can be effective leaders (Roberson et al., 2021), providing further impetus to explore how cognitive differences can also be valuable leadership skills. Individuals with ADHD, which is another neurodivergent condition, have been reported as experiencing career success both "in spite of" and "because of" ADHD (Crook & McDowall (2023), signifying that being simultaneously neurodivergent and experiencing career success

is not a straightforward matter. Like other neurodivergent people, autistic people report that being satisfied with their careers matters more than employers' well-intentioned neurodiversity awareness efforts (Clegg, 2023), driving our research to explore what neurodivergent people think about their career experiences.

Focusing on autism, Giannantonio and Hurley-Hanson (2022) have explored challenges encountered by neurodivergent people in organisational hiring processes. However, for a neurodivergent person to experience a successful career, the challenges relevant to career progression and development extending beyond hiring must be understood, which is the aim of this paper.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Neurodiversity and neurodivergence

Breaking down the word '[neuro][diversity]', signals the term represents the diversity in neurology between people. The estimated 15–20% of the global population that are neurodivergent (Doyle, 2020), are a minority who differ in clinically quantifiable ways, created by unseen biological mechanisms that produce different processing styles. Included in this categorisation are autism, ADHD, Tourette Syndrome, learning differences such as dyslexia and dyspraxia, many of which coexist, for example autism and ADHD are now recognised as a combined diagnosis (National Autistic Society 2022). Therefore, a majority (75-80%) of the world's population are classed as 'neurotypical' that is, not being neurodivergent. A person can thus be either neurodivergent or neurotypical, reflecting the above conceptualisation of neurodiversity as being concerned with neurological differences. It is therefore incorrect to state that autistic or dyslexic individual is neurodiverse- in fact, every single human being is neurodiverse, as these innate neurological differences are an essential part of human existence.

A critical observation to promoting learning about career development experiences for neurodivergent people is that the term 'neurodiversity' is frequently used incorrectly. Individuals are referred to as 'neurodiverse' in studies of selection (Saleh and Bernick 2022), career development (Hunter & Hunter 2022) and leadership (Roberson et al., 2022). In conflating these terms, researchers inadvertently highlight that the essence of neurodivergence and hence the challenges affecting neurodivergent people are poorly understood. This conflation may impede career development because incomplete understanding spills over into the language and interpretations of autistic people by managers and talent specialists. This misuse appears minor but reinforces tendencies to focus on challenges rather than strengths, singling out individuals and advocating adaptations for a disabled minority, rather than harnessing atypical and valuable strengths in the manner of inclusive talent development. Language can signify all kinds of meanings and it is interesting that even neurodiversity advocates urging employers to view neurodivergence as natural cognition variation bestowing talents and struggles not deficits, use the term 'neurominority' (Doyle, 2020). This neatly signifies this population is a distinct minority but may also conjure images of an oppressed minority group, somehow subservient to the 'normal' majority.

Exclusion in career development

A useful starting point for considering neurodivergent people's career development draws from Nishi's (2013) view that inclusion is multifaceted, requiring deliberate harnessing of diverse perspectives. Since the essence of neurodiversity is recognising that different cognitive styles and processing abilities exist, inclusive career choice and development should value cognitive diversity, colloquially promoted as 'diversity of thought.' External hiring processes for joining the organisation share some features of internal promotion and progression processes, so it is pertinent to review how career development experiences can be shaped by factors similar to those for assessing suitability for organisational entry.

Overlap is seen in the shortlisting process, for example a history of frequent job changes, part-time or temporary employment often accompanies neurodivergent applicants (Baldwin & Costley, 2016), raising potential for bias if hiring managers reject candidates on the grounds of a chequered work history, which they believe signifies an unstable track record. Bias could parallel that shown to an internal candidate who has worked in several previous roles, perhaps because it has been hard to find a good 'fit' between skills, characteristics and environment, before applying for another role.

Giannantonio & Hurley-Hanson (2022) highlight that signals sent by interviewers can support or impede interview performance. Interviewers can signal inclusion and acceptance of neurodivergence by asking about candidates' different thinking styles, or by contrast can exclude candidates by assuming neurotypical norms, for example judging that unusual eye contact patterns signify awkwardness, nervousness, and poor communication skills. Autistic people frequently report interpreting questions too literally, avoiding eye contact, handshakes or misjudging social situations, reducing their appointment chances (Stankova & Trajkovski, 2010) and performing sub-optimally because of differences in social interactions from their neurotypical peers (Sarrett, 2017). In a progression interview, neurodivergent employees are equally likely to experience negative or positive signals from interviewers or display social interactions that interviewers misunderstand, again showing overlap.

Misconceptions relating to the costs and difficulties of providing accommodations for people with disabilities throughout the selection process (Annabi & Locke, 2019; Kwan, 2020) and unfavourable coworkers reactions (Carrero et al., 2019) contribute to hiring bias. Interviewers may reject a person following their application or interview because they believe making changes at work will be too costly or complicated or worry that different communication styles may not be an easy fit with colleagues. Again, in a career progression interview, similar negative perceptions are likely, unless the candidate and their actual performance record are well known to the internal selectors. Individuals who use their political 'nous' and self-promotion abilities, have been shown to attract high-performance ratings somewhat separately from actual performance (Barends and Janssen 2016), leaving Roberson et al.(2021) to conclude this one reason why autistic people are overlooked for leadership roles, as they find this impression management hard to do.

Training, learning and development

Inclusivity here equates to managers acting to ensure neurodivergent employees have plenty of notice and detail about forthcoming training events as well as recognising that people learn

at different paces, not to an absolute standard of time (Volpone et al., 2022). In this study, is interesting that the terms ‘learning’ and ‘training’ but not ‘development’ are used. Similarly, Doyle & McDowall (2022) discuss principles of neuroinclusion, including training and managing performance, but not career development. Khan et al. (2022) reviewed empirical studies which highlighted to employers how unique neurodivergent characteristics can benefit organisations, focusing upon how to adapt training methods to suit neurodivergence, leaving career development on the periphery, again subsuming development to training. We are left to wonder if providing effective training is at the expense of the more complicated issue of personal and career development. Training enables individuals to learn knowledge, skills, and attitudes to support performance within a current role, whereas development is a ‘messier’ longer-term concept, consisting of progression from interacting with others, making optimal choices about learning experiences, roles and career choices, expanding potential through conscious and unconscious learning processes and being better equipped for future roles (Garavan et al., 1995). Our first research question is thus:

RQ1 How do neurodivergent people experience career development?

The challenges autistic people face in advancing careers have been likened to the challenges facing neurodivergent children in their academic progression (Hunter and Hunter 2022). In education, this ‘hidden curriculum’ (Alsubaie, 2015) requires children to grasp social rules, something neurodivergent children find harder than their neurotypical peers, as these rules are neither explicated nor taught. Instead, children rely on picking up social cues to learn the necessary ‘do’s and don’ts’, for example, understanding the need to flex behaviours to suit their teachers or peers (Myles & Smith, 2005; Thomas & Boellstorff, 2017). In workplaces, these hidden ‘rules of the game’ governing career progression include unwritten social behaviours, workplace norms, politicking and self-promotion.

For a neurodivergent person to aspire to leadership requires appropriate development experiences which contribute to creating positive self-image (Powers et al., 2002) and sufficient self-efficacy to consider they can and want to be successful in leadership (Schyns et al., 2020) and career advancement generally (Badura et al., 2020). Compared to neurotypical peers, neurodivergent people participate less in LDP’s, being denied access to networking, social activities, information, resources, and opportunities (Morris et al., 2015), thus further highlighting their exclusion. Hunter and Hunter (2022) identify development options for autistic people, including assigning peer mentors, exposure to growth opportunities, shadowing others in possible new roles and prescribing experiences which enable leadership, communication and influencing skills acquisition, learning experiences which aim to develop these skills in line with established neurotypical norms as to what these should look like.

Leadership and neurodivergence

Whilst career success is subjective (Shockley et al., 2016), a reasonable assumption is that both neurodivergent and neurotypical people seek job satisfaction, work-life balance, professional growth, financial independence, value, acceptance, and fulfilment (Raymaker et al., 2022; Richards et al., 2023). As leadership progression is a route to personal growth, career satisfaction and higher earnings, the lack of studies of neurodivergent leaders is troubling and has driven this study. Whilst neurodivergent people acting as role models and

disability advocates have been studied (Carter et al., 2011; Powers et al., 2002), this narrow focus overlooks the significance of exploring how skills associated with effective leadership are decided.

Critical disability theorists argue ableist worldviews (Peña et al., 2016) have driven assumptions that effective leadership behaviours can be only those which fit traditional leadership models, which are dominated by views that effective leadership requires interpersonal influence qualities (Burke et al., 2006; Ceri-Booms et al., 2017; Luthans & Avolio, 2003), social acumen and influence (Zaccaro, 2014). A pervasive belief exists that managers and leaders should be highly skilled in handling relationships at work, self-regulate emotions and display empathy. Popularised as ‘emotional intelligence,’ these skills are considered predictors of global leadership assignment success (Shmueli Gabel et al., 2005), and significantly these valuations have been at the expense of task abilities (Lord et al., 2017). Neurodivergent people can therefore become effective leaders *only* by fitting into the language, behaviours and approaches expected. This expectation creates ‘masking,’ the costs of which are well documented (Russell et al., 2016), particularly for autistic women (Kanfischer et al., 2017; Annabi, 2018; Sedgwick et al., 2021). Roberson et al. (2021) notes the emphasis on social and interpersonal aspects of leadership detracts from the possibility that neurodivergent strengths can equate to effective leadership skills.

Task-based leadership skills framework

Drawing upon management and clinical literature, consistent with a socio-relational underpinning, Roberson et al. (2021) propose how neurodivergent characteristics may lend themselves to effective leadership skills. Task-based leadership theory is revisited to identify leadership requires planning, organising, goalsetting, boundary scanning within and outside organisations, developing and solving complex problems (Zaccaro, 2014). This lens creates a leadership model that values hyper-focus, preference for repetitive tasks and comfort with complex data and systems, attributes that have been collectively labelled as ‘*systemising*’ (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009) in autistic people. These skills are valued for roles within cybersecurity, robotics and complex analytics (Twaronite, 2019; Schein, 2020; Wong et al., 2018), but are unexplored in leadership roles. Roberson’s lens links autistic systemising ability to the social arena, i.e., understanding an effective social system needs high morality, honesty, loyalty, and trustworthiness, which are recognised autistic characteristics (de Schipper et al., 2016; Austin & Pisano, 2017; Hendricks, 2010). Hence, this paper explores the question:

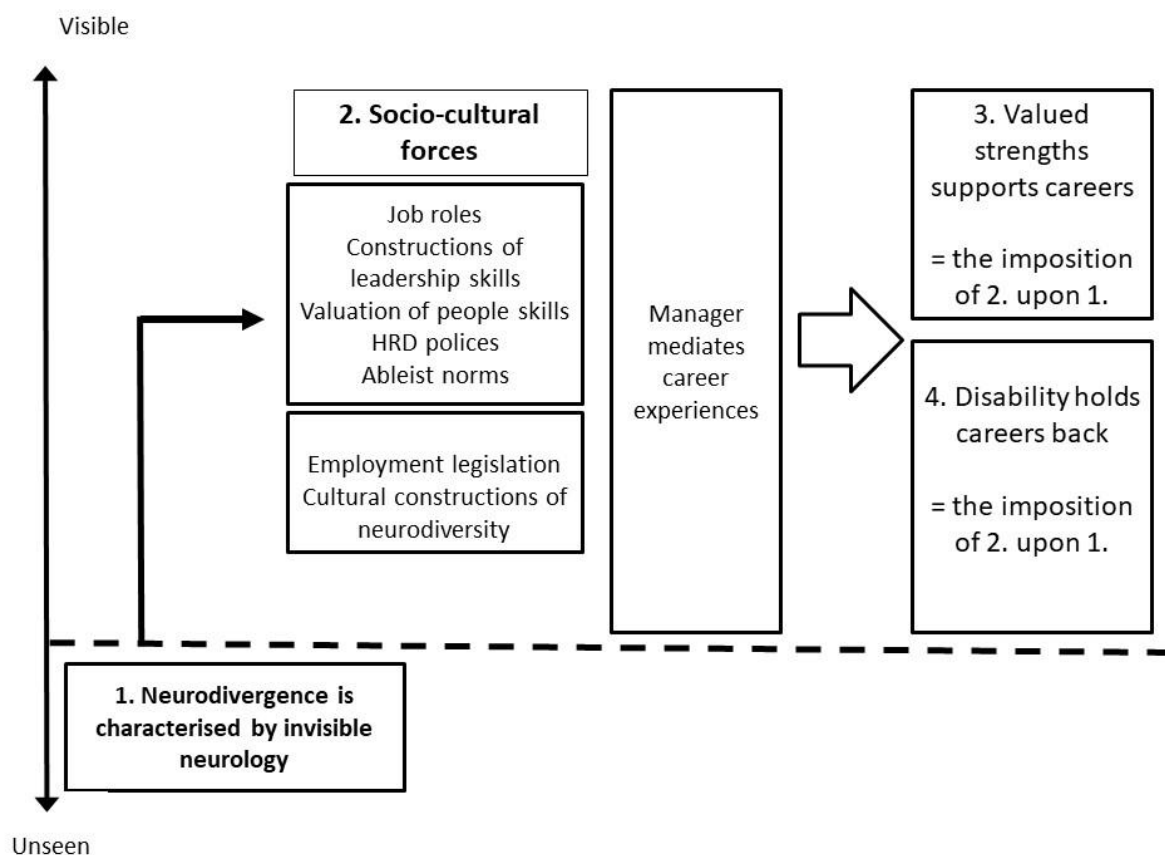
RQ2 Is leadership development ‘working’ for neurodivergent people?

Theoretical framework

Employment legislation surrounding neurodivergence is underpinned by the social model of disability, requiring protections and accommodations to improve employment outcomes. Williams (1999:803) critiques this ‘writing the body out’, as naïve in understanding the challenges being disabled represents, failing to recognise individual variations in how disabled people experience the social environment. Autistic employees have different neurology to their neurotypical peers, whatever social world they work within, so

understanding how to ‘write the body in’ (Williams, 1999:803) differentiates between these neurological differences and the impact of their ‘social setting’ (Reindal, 2008:144). For example, autistic people can experience discomfort from loud or sudden noises, and being excluded when those noise levels mean they choose to avoid work social events. Oliver (2013:1025) laments that the social model has ‘barely made a dent in the employment system’, a criticism which resonates with our aim of understanding the exclusionary aspects of career development for neurodivergent people. The framework presented here indicates how a socio-relational approach (Finkelstein, 2001) impacts career development, focusing upon autistic people specifically.

Figure 1: Socio relational framework for neurodivergent career outcomes



Invisible neurology creates differences for autistic people, independent of the social world, e.g., the ability to spot detail or experience distress from loud noise (Box 1). Box 2 includes aspects of working life which constitute the social world; HRD policies, institutional mechanisms for specifying leadership skills, conducting appraisals, designing development programmes, talent planning reviews, as well as job roles, legislation and media portrayals. Career success depends on having and using capabilities and experiencing appropriate development opportunities, but also upon these other socio-cultural factors.

Line managers play a key role in working experiences, indicated by the shaded area, thus the paper explores how managers perceive an autistic employee’s skills and abilities, which in

turn shape autistic people's career development experiences. Together, Boxes 3 and 4 indicate possible outcomes.

METHODS

Neurodivergence is an objectively 'real' condition, yet the theoretical framework identifies that perceptions of self or others are inevitably social constructions. Therefore, qualitative inquiry is necessary for accessing managers' and employees' perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). Neurodivergent individuals are considered legally disabled, but simultaneously with strengths; a duality that renders neurodivergence open to multiple perceptions and shifting interpretations. Collecting data necessitates asking questions about disabilities and skills, both heavily socially constructed concepts. Therefore, an interpretivist approach elicits sufficient detail about how respondents understand both.

Over 100 organisations were contacted to support the study but the vast majority declined to support, as few were able to identify employees who had openly disclosed their autism. Despite stressing the connection between neurodivergent individuals' specific skills and organisational value, none of these HR professionals had heard of the term neurodiversity prior to being contacted, reinforcing the dearth of organisational understanding about neurodiversity. Of the six that agreed to take part, the two largest, organisations 5 and 6, were more easily able to do so, in part due to their support and public commitment to people with disabilities and in part the sheer numbers within their workforce. Organisation 5 became the primary data collection site. Table 1 provides further details of the participating organisations.

Managers were asked about their knowledge of autism, the differences they noted in their autistic employees and how they felt strengths were valued by the organisation. Data was gathered from thirteen managers, generating five pairings (see Table 2).

Ten interviews with autistic employees were carried out, one of which was unusable. Further qualitative data was gathered from two other autistic people, via a questionnaire following a similar format and structure as the interviews. Autistic employees were asked to describe their career experiences to date, job fulfilment and opportunities to use their strengths. They were also asked to describe their beliefs about others' perceptions of autism and their decision to disclose. The final employee sample comprised data from eleven respondents, all male, with ages ranging from 25–55 years, some of whom had disclosed to their manager. Coded names are used to preserve anonymity (see Table 3).

Table 1: Participating organisations

Organisation	sector and number of employees	author's notes on initial HR response
1	Leisure 15,000	Organisation 1 is a provider of leisure and hotel services employing 15,000 employees across 4 sites and employing 9,000 at the site where the interviews took place.
2	large, local NHS trust approx. 5000	Organisation 2 is a local NHS trust employing approximately 5000 employees. The Director for Diversity and Inclusion was supportive of the study and invited HR and line managers to respond. The HR specialists declined to take part, and just one line manager volunteered.
2	Service delivery for learning disability approx. 1200	Organisation 3 is a service delivery provider for learning disability support employing approximately 1200 employees. HR specialists declined to take part in the study.
4	Software design c500	Organisation 4 is a medium-sized software design company, privately owned and employing approximately 500 at two sites. A senior manager offered access to the study as no HR specialists were operating at the site.
5	large quasi- public-sector agency employing 65,000 people across multiple UK sites	Organisation 5 is a very large public-sector organisation employing approximately 65,000 people across several sites nationwide. The interviews took place with a talent planning specialist, a specialist in Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) and two advisors with expertise in Disability Support and Reasonable Adjustments. Organisation 5 was the only organisation able to provide line managers, HR specialists and autistic employees. It is the primary data collection site.
6	large engineering firm employing 12,000 people at local site	Organisation 6 is a large private sector organisation operating globally and employing 12,000 at one of their UK sites. They are heavily engineering based and the HR manager granted access through the Occupational Health Director.

Table 2: Line manager interviews from Organisations 1,2,3,4,5 and 6 (*5 usable pairings of employee and manager)

Organisation	Line manager	Line manager's experience and job title	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Talking about employee/s
1	A	Operations Manager Oversees 5 restaurants. Managed teams for over 10 years. Managed autistic employee for 4 years	Male	35 - 45	White British	Tom
1	B	Operations Supervisor Managed people for over 5 years. Managed 2 autistic employees for 2 years	Female	55 plus	White British	Sol Joanne
2	C	Staff Nurse/Ward manager. 7 years 'experience of line managing people. Managed other employees with hidden disabilities, including dyslexia and autistic employee for over a year.	Male	45-55	White British	Derek Sharon
3	D	Operations Manager in nationwide service provider for disability support. 10 +years LM experience. Managed autistic employees for about 2 years.	Female	45-55	White British	Aaron Lara
4	E	Data Delivery Manager with 5 years + line management experience. Managed/worked closely with autistic employee for 6 months	Female	35-45	White British	Xavier
5	F*	Team leader with 10+ years' experience of managing people across varied organisations. Managed autistic employee for about 1 year	Male	55 plus	White British	Keith * (PAIR)
5	G*	Team leader with about 13 years' experience across varied organisations. Managed autistic employees for about 4 years	Female	45-55	White British	Shelley*(PAIR)
5	H*	Team Leader. 7 years' experience of line management. Managed employee for 4 months	Female	55 plus	White British	Colin* (PAIR)
5	I	Business learning Manager. Responsible for overseeing graduate trainees, one of which is her autistic employee. 18 months as line manager and extensive prior experience as technical specialist.	Female	55 plus	White British	Leila
5	J	Managed and supported autistic employees for many years. Adjunct role as disability mentor and wellbeing champion	Female	35-45	White British	Tim
5	K*	Team leader with 2 years' experience. Managed autistic employee for 22 months.	Female	35-45	White British	Jim * (PAIR)
5	L*	Team leader promoted from a technical specialist role. About 2 years' experience of managing people. Managed autistic employee for 18 months	Male	25-35	White British	Pearl* (unusable interview)
6	M*	Director of a large Engineering Division. 25 years in variety of management roles some of which have been global, managing up to 200employees. Managed and worked closely with autistic employee for over 5 years	Male	55 plus	White British	Callum* (PAIR)

Table 3: Interviews with autistic employees – All employees were from organisations 5 and 6

Organisation	Employee	Job title	Disclosed to manager?	Gender	Age	Ethnicity	Data collected from	Paired with Manager
5	Keith*	Administrative Assistant	YES	Male	25-35	White British	Interview	Paired with Manager F
5	Shelley*	Administrative Assistant	YES	Female	25-35	White British	Interview	Paired with Manager G
5	Colin*	Administrative officer	YES	Male	35-45	White British	Interview	Paired with Manager H
5	Jim*	Administrative officer	YES	Male	35-45	White British	Interview	Paired with Manager K
6	Callum*	Engineer	YES	Male	45-55	White British	Interview	Paired with Manager M
5	Jack	Administrative officer	NO	Male	55 plus	White British	Interview	
5	Joseph	Technical Specialist	NO	Male	35-45	White British	Interview	
5	Steve	Administrative officer	NO	Male	25-35	White British	Interview	
6	Martin	Engineer	NO	Male	35-45	White British	Interview	
5	Shaun	Administrative officer	NO	Male	35-45	White British	Questionnaire	<i>geographical and time constraints prevented F2F interview</i>
5	Gavin	Web developer	YES	Male	25-35	White British	Questionnaire	<i>geographical and time constraints prevented F2F interview</i>
5	Pearl*	Administrative officer	YES	Female	25-35	White British	Interview	<i>Would have been a pair with Manager, but her interview was unusable</i>

Notes:

- All employees had a diagnosis of autism but not all had disclosed this to their managers.
- Of the 12 employees from organisations 5 and 6 that volunteered to be respondents for the study, ten were interviewed face to face
- Two respondents volunteered to be interviewed (*Gavin and Shaun*), but could not attend due to geographical constraints, so instead completed a questionnaire which contained questions broadly the same as those used in the interview.
- One interviewee (*Pearl*) requested the tape was stopped 30 minutes after starting the interview. Although she did complete the interview, her transcript was therefore unusable.
- In total, nine usable interview transcripts and two completed questionnaires were generated, resulting in a final sample of views and experiences from eleven autistic employees
- Of these eleven employees, five of them also gave permission for their managers to be interviewed, creating five pairings

Data analysis

All interviews were recorded and transcribed. Thematic analysis was adopted to identify emergent themes with the focus on textual data and small sample size, lending itself to template analysis (King (2012; Brookes et al (2014).

Managers' transcripts

Early themes emerged as the lack of knowledge about neurodiversity and autism, related to words of '*invisible, hidden.*' Managers noted *differences between autistic and non-autistic employees*, interpreted as useful strengths and disabling or problematic in some way, reinforcing the duality within the theoretical framework. Template analysis encourages iteration in coding development and contextual factors emerged where managers reported difficulties experienced by autistic people, labelled as '*organisational context creates difficulties*' Revisiting managers' difficulties appeared to be related directly to autistic characteristics of social interaction, including directness.

The *hidden* nature of autism and difficulties connected to HRM and HRD policies and practices emerged as *sources of difficulties for the managers*. *Differences between managers* themselves, emerged as shapers of the experiences of employees and their managers, echoing the additionality elements specified in the social relational approach to understanding disability.

Autistic employees' transcripts

Being perceived as lacking 'people' skills and perceptions that colleagues felt being autistic was problematic, odd, or awkward, emerged as a key theme. Invisibility appeared as a strong theme, featuring in references to tensions experienced in their disclosure decisions. Overall, the employees sample yielded fewer, but less varied themes.

Table 4: Themes identified from interviews with line managers

Knowledge and beliefs about autism • Confident in their knowledge • Guessing in their knowledge • importance of organisations EDI training • employees know better than HR Invisibility* • easier to accommodate disability if its visible • difficulty in believing someone is disabled for self • difficulty in believing someone is disabled for team • easier for team to be sympathetic if can see the disability easier for self to be sympathetic if can see the disability Difference between autistic and non-autistic employees beliefs about what is 'normal' characteristics create difficulties for the team autistic person can sometimes be highly skilled and sometimes very disabling	strengths routine preference means work hard in jobs others don't want to do routine preferences mean insistence on high standards higher performance than others in same grade job willingness to do jobs other people don't like high commitment when others don't different to manage autistic employees than others honesty is refreshing higher output than most operating at higher level is good for business always on time Disability, problematic, struggles - o Find social interaction harder than others do - o Struggling with role - o Struggling with different tasks – flexibility - o Noise and lights make the job hard, sometimes cause stress
Organisational context creates difficulties • continuous change and improvement - o quality drive - o restructuring changes job role to more interaction/customer facing - o jobs are contracting, fewer opportunities - o roles are constrained - o large organisations can't change standardised procedures - o forcing people to be flexible - o flexibility is needed in most jobs - o tension between achieving performance and complying with equalities legislation - o Equality act is helpful • HR (inc Occ Health) service - o HR is remote - o OH lacks expertise	
Differences between managers themselves * • experience • age • attitudes to managing • attitudes to autism • attitudes to disability and difference • knowledge about autism • personal and prior connections to autistic people •	more causes of managers difficulties • being different to rest of team • invisibility • people management practices - o recruitment - o ease of redeployment - o capability and absence management - o career development

FINDINGS

People skills: I'm not a people person, so I can't be a leader

An integral aspect of an individual's career development experiences is their level of self-efficacy and self-esteem, an aspect of career 'self' that drives how that person uses their skills and abilities. In turn, this contributes to chances of being seen as having potential for progression, or skills useful in leadership. Hence, exploring what neurodivergent people say and think about themselves is a useful starting point.

Colin believes his lack of 'people skills' will limit his career progression:

*One of the things that put me off promotion is having to deal with other people and telling them off. Sometimes that can be a very difficult thing to do. I could do a higher- grade job if I was checking people's work, but I would still have to deal with team leaders and still have to know how to handle difficult phone calls. I **might** not be very helpful, not say, or do the right things.*

Joseph speculates why a higher graded managerial role would not be a good fit:

*I couldn't manage people. In all my time here - 26 years - I only ever had one person to manage and he left! I say what I think, I'm too direct. I probably go a bit too far in the way I am with people. **Maybe** management would not be my forte.*

Colin's 'might' and Joseph's 'maybe' are concerning, begging the question how they think they could not fulfil the role. Picking the 'right' way to tell someone off, and knowing how to use directness effectively are skills that can be trained and thus provides valuable development. Colin and Joseph might well turn out to be unsuitable for a leadership role, either through an actual skills gap or through personal choice, but at this stage their own beliefs about self, in relation to what they think being a leader is all about, means they will fall at the first hurdle.

It may also be these autistic interviewees are sure that they do not want a leadership role, feeling, like Shaun, that such a role will be heavily people focused, because he finds '*other people are needlessly complex and extremely draining*'.

Colin, Joseph, and Shaun assumed that a managerial role would be more people focused, yet without managerial level exposure, this remains an unknown. Paradoxically, their current roles already demand non-discretionary people interaction. In a managerial capacity, they may have more discretion in spending time with others. There are obvious environmental benefits, too, where seniority makes it somewhat easier to secure useful changes to the immediate surroundings.

What are 'people' skills?

Leadership has an element of people skills, albeit loosely defined. Exploring how managers express their interpretation of the 'people skills' they notice in their autistic employees, Colin's manager believes that reaching out and wanting to mix with teammates is a natural behaviour.

He is definitely a loner and doesn't seem to have any friends in work. Sometimes he mixes with them if we are in a group, but he doesn't choose to mix. He is part of the team. But I

wouldn't say he is the best at team working. He waits for people to come to him, not a **natural** team worker.

Pearl's manager judges what teamwork should be, implicitly suggesting being chatty equates to being nice:

*When she is in a chatty mood, she chats a lot, that's **nice** to have that engagement. But more often than not she does not want to chat, she gets on with work.*

In talking about Leila, Manager I equates being 'comradely', 'chummy' and 'friendly', as 'normal' behaviours:

The team take a long time to get used to Leila, because of the way she interacts in class - she definitely has a strong desire to help in the case team. Will help other trainees if they have another issue with a particular subject, but not in a sort of comradely way. It's about getting the job done and passing on knowledge. Not really a chummy, friendly way

Manager J describes the conversations she overhears between Tim and his colleagues, also intuitively judging what is or isn't normal:

*Good at working within a team in terms of understanding the role that they and others play. But not good at working in a team in terms of day-to-day interactions. Not engaging really in **normal** conversations and chit chat. That kind of thing that may or not add value to the job in hand, but I think is largely beneficial.*

These managers hold implicit beliefs that there is a 'natural' approach to teamwork, which other team members may not welcome. The word 'normal' appears too easy to use, and significantly no realisation that doing so creates exclusion. Inclusive language does not categorise people as normal because they are in the majority, making those in the minority the implied opposite of normal. Instead, speaking about 'typical' or 'atypical' characteristics would better reflect the essence of the neurodiversity paradigm.

Leila, sensitive to workplace chatter and noise, elects to wear headphones to mitigate the sensory overload, so she can concentrate and produce good work. Her manager notices that she finds it hard:

To differentiate between people's voices, it was too much. She finds it very distressing. She misses out on the social interaction between the trainees. She doesn't mix with them in the same 'way'. It's a big part of their learning, as they are all at the same stages.

Someone like Leila may easily lose the gist of the discussion, perhaps not hearing everything said or missing important information generated through informal discussions. Leila's manager is astute enough to recognise that the consequences of Leila's sensitivities resulted in her leaving the conversation and would likely compromise her progress. Networking with colleagues inside and outside the organisation is common to develop connections that can benefit someone in their current role and open opportunities for improved career moves.

Perceptions of behaviours can shape career development, e.g., effective team leaders should be perceived as approachable. It is easy to imagine that someone like Leila, who wears her headphones much more than her colleagues, might cause others to think she is the least approachable person in the team. It may be that appearing, rather than actually being approachable, fosters progression and so this accommodation may actually jeopardise her promotion chances. Careers can be impacted negatively where decision-makers feel these

different ways of interacting are unusual. Some people may feel genuinely uncomfortable at appointing someone who appears not to take part in meetings in ways they expect or lacks the skills they consider necessary to contribute fully. Equally, quirkiness and difference might be sought, encouraged and reframed as creativity and where someone becomes known for this skill and differences in style welcomed, bodes better for career outcomes.

Is directness a valued skill?

Integrity is frequently linked to honesty, a quality that Derek's manager values, equating honest and direct style as strength:

He is very honest to patients. It's a good skill. You can be very honest and truthful and not very good. And you can be honest and put it in a very empathic way. I would say he'd do that with patients. (Manager C)

Manager M dealing with a high-profile client's complaint about a late running project; having asked various colleagues about the issue elicited vague responses, skirting around the cause. In contrast, Callum's candour:

I know what I'm going to get. It's complete trust and no uncertainty. There are times when his approach is what I need, like when I need someone to be strong, he will just be very strong. For customer response purposes he is straight to the point, matter of fact. I think this is a strength. If he delivers a message like it is, it is sometimes extremely successful, but one might argue that this is not very empathetic

Here, he trusts absolutely that not only can Callum accurately grasp a troublesome situation but has both skill and will to convey difficult messages to the customer. He downplays the need for strong empathy with this client, interesting given how often empathy is cited as a valuable leadership skill. He has seen the benefits this direct approach brings and identifies he does have people skills; he can 'get people on side.'

Rather than be disconcerted by directness, these managers also view it as helpful:

I find [his honesty] quite refreshing sometimes. Lots of people have opinions and you never know what they are. Whereas Tom feels comfortable enough to say it. And not kind of blot that out or bottle it up. (Manager A)

I always liked the fact that L would always give me a straight answer. She would be quick to say you've done that wrong, or just pointing it out. (Manager D)

Her directness is brilliant. I was taken aback the first few times. Often, she will pick holes in what I've done - which feels a bit... erm.. Well, I got quite defensive! But now I know then it's water off a duck's back. It definitely keeps me on my toes! (Manager L)

Sharon's manager describes what happened when a senior manager visited the ward to announce that free transport home after a late shift would be stopped, an unpopular decision as employees without cars would struggle to commute. Her implicit assumption that junior employees do not question senior leaders is likely common in many organisations:

When a senior manager comes onto the ward you have to behave in a different way. I would say that Sharon didn't care who was there. She would be quite open and honest. She went; "right who has made this decision? I'm having them!"

Speaking up in such a direct way can also be interpreted by managers as problematic, as these managers did:

Sent emails that were too blunt and upset one member of staff. It did cause me a real problem. I don't think that the recipient will ever really understand - they don't know about the condition. (Manager J)

The Board Director visited and walked round the office. She just stopped her and said we didn't want to go on phones, why did you put us on phones, what's happening to all our other work? She just came straight out with it. She will call a spade a spade. Not a shovel. (Manager G)

How a recipient interprets a message depends on other factors other than the sender's style. Manager K recognises that what Jim says can be OK or not, dependent upon others' subjective valuations, 'he will say it how he sees it, in his own language, won't massage their ego'.

Leadership skills include preferences for routine and detail

Tom asked Manager A if he could take on the 'meeting and greeting' of guests when arriving at the restaurant. His response comes from knowing this task has never yet been done by someone at that level:

I just disagreed that he should be on the door and hosting all the time, I wouldn't expect a junior manager to do this. There was huge conflict between us, to the point where he took a leave of sickness for two weeks.

After his absence, Tom returned to work with an autism diagnosis, sparking a conversation about support in work, resulting in an agreement to craft his role:

He's a 'door host'- greets every single person that walks in the door. There's very much a routine to it...almost a script. How you greet people, how you interact with children. He just took that and developed it into his own way. It's fantastic. We have something that our guests love and that he created.

Crafting Tom's role (Berg et al., 2013) is an under used accommodation despite legislative prescription, perhaps because it is hard to believe that routine work is an enjoyable part of management. Planning for Xavier's performance appraisal, Manager E cannot help wondering how to guide him, suspecting that promotion would remove him from the routine work he enjoyed:

How can I have a conversation with X about career development when I know that he loves doing this type of repetitive work?

Perhaps managers could be reassured that routine is not as problematic as they think. Colin outlines how a manager could respond to someone like himself, who likes routine work far more than his colleagues.

Others find it boring; routine is OK to me. I spent a long-time issuing letter for months on end. I didn't mind doing it. Repetition is boring, but if you are an Aspie you tend to think it is perfectly OK. I like a routine. Neurotypicals might do this for a week; I could go happily at this routine task for months on end.

Aaron's manager notes his attention to detail:

He would happily work for a long time on PowerPoint slides, not be easily distracted

As in many semi-skilled roles, Aaron is likely to be in trouble for taking too long, especially if his manager has not recognised that he could do the job just as well if given additional time. Conversely, senior leaders are rarely challenged or questioned about how long it takes them to establish facts and analyse data, and so are perhaps less likely to feel pressurised. Indeed, they might be criticised for insufficient analytical capability and making rash decisions through off-the-cuff thinking and over quick responses, highlighting that decision making timescales are subjective.

DISCUSSION

Findings have shown that neurological differences and managers' views about what they believe constitutes valued skills and talents can both enable and constrain career experiences, aspects the discussion now explores.

Valuations of skill

The valuations managers place upon directness point towards this as important in expanding approaches to assessing leadership potential. For example, where a leader is needed to address immediate crisis, perhaps where the team finds itself in a 'back to the wall' situation, or where ambiguity and mismanaged timescales and boundaries have created problems, then it is possible that being direct like Joseph or setting clear boundaries and managing performance, like the 'telling off' Colin referred to, become precisely the qualities needed. Where leadership is seen as setting task parameters and giving clarity, this explicitly values directness and offers opportunities for neurodivergent people to shine. Whilst most leadership roles are not dealing with immediate and ongoing crisis, career development for autistic people could be enhanced by recognising that not all leadership positions are not the same and need a different skill mix.

Directness can also show up as integrity, an interpretation of which is the approach of strictly applying rules, sanctions and rewards. Using these capabilities can create a highly effective leadership style, through gaining respect for fairness and consistency. A tension here is that although fair treatment is a necessary element of inclusion, full inclusion can only be gained where leaders can work with actual differences between individuals, whether these be cognitive or not. In effect, someone who plays by the rules, must also be able to offer individual consideration to team members and so neurotypical or neurodivergent, leadership requires the flexibility and knowledge to adapt accordingly. It is possible that misleading stereotypes about autistic people being inflexible may steer decision makers away from appointing to leadership roles.

Directness also plays out as integrity when challenging organisational practices, wrongdoings or decisions. Where someone is candid and outspoken, managers have choices about whether to develop or subvert these conversations, choices which shape that person's subsequent career development experiences. A manager can fete someone for their courage and candour, or they can relegate them to troublemaker status or label as being insensitive, neither of which would likely contribute to promoting career and work experiences. Many employees do avoid challenging higher status people, through awkwardness, embarrassment or wary of the consequences upon their careers, yet being prepared to speak truths aloud and challenging

poorly thought-out decisions, ought to be deemed as a valued organisational asset and encouraged, rather than career limiting.

Like their managers, autistic employees recognise they do have very direct styles, yet unlike their managers, nobody mentioned this might be an asset that others --career decision makers included-- would value. Their interpretations were universally negative, connecting being direct to fears that colleagues would not like them or step away. No-one reframed this as a being good at ‘cutting through noise’ or being willing and able to circumvent other’s overly political behaviours, raising the possibility that autistic people do not know that directness is valuable. This is important in increasing self- efficacy and making choices about which roles to aim for. Career maturity usually brings increased self-awareness, making it particularly important for younger people at the beginning of their careers to explicate directness as a strength without awkwardness or embarrassment. Organisations could signal directness is valued by including appropriate text in person specifications, competency frameworks and job advertisements. Although integrity does frequently appear, it is usually defined in terms of ethical and moral behaviours, rather than being associated with direct style, indicating perhaps that organisations fight shy of employing people who are prepared to voice opinions.

Valuing affinity for detail and high tolerance of routine is established as a valuable autistic skill, particularly in software engineering and technological disciplines (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Grant, 2015), where neurodivergent people outperform neurotypicals who have described the quantitative coding work as difficult and boring (Morris et al., 2015; Wang, 2014). These preferences and complex data analysis skills point autistic people to progression within such industries. However, acquiring detailed, accurate and relevant knowledge of any given situation to assess the problems, constraints and opportunities presented, is also surely an effective leadership requirement. Where detail is valued in these ways too, career choices can be expanded outside purely technical domains and into leadership roles.

Career spaces; missing out from the ‘social’

Listening to managers talk about what is ‘normal, natural and nice’ indicates it is common for organisations to send implicit messages that socialising during and after work is important. This requirement for social interaction is something that some autistic people can struggle with, so may decide not to participate, either by withdrawing from team spaces at work, or declining invitations that are not directly work related. However, it is in these spaces that career opportunities can emerge, for example hearing talk about interesting new projects, future vacancies and industry-wide developments. News about colleagues who are and aren’t progressing can be valuable to those wanting to move, working out which roles might become vacant. Whilst it is not the case that to enjoy a successful career, someone *has* to get to know colleagues, build networks and friendships, it is certainly an important element, particularly in their early stages of employment.

Stereotypes

Like Leila, Tim and Colin, autistic people might be thought of as unapproachable or poor team workers, or like Joseph and Colin as being rude and speaking out inappropriately. If those making promotion decisions hold onto these stereotypes, believing that autism equates to having poor or somewhat naive people skills, these are likely to negatively impact career

progression or being identified as having leadership potential. Of course, being able to relate well interpersonally to team members, seniors and colleagues and influence positively is an important leadership competence, but the work of Roberson et al (2021), reinforces this point as to whether both skill sets are considered *equally* valuable in developing and appointing leaders. Addressing stereotypes requires neurodiversity knowledge to be embedded throughout organisations so that it reaches line managers, thereby increasing the chance that a neurodivergent person is managed by someone who knows how to support their careers. Better knowledge lessens the chance that a talented neurodivergent person, promoted into a new team might have to prove themselves all over again and address previously dealt with barriers, if the new team does not understand or accommodate autistic preferences. Arguably many newly promoted employees have to do this too, but for a neurodivergent person, it appears that the stakes are somewhat higher.

Leadership Development Programmes

So far the discussion has explored the impact of socially constructed perceptions of skills upon career development. Participating in appropriate early leadership experiences which develop positive self-beliefs and skills is essential for developing leaders (De Rue & Wellman, 2009), and so the discussion now examines how development programmes might shape the experiences of autistic people.

Leadership development programmes are frequently designed with sufficient ‘social’ time and space for participants to connect with others, assuming this will facilitate collaboration in the subsequent learning activities by sharing knowledge, opinions and developing responses to problem scenarios. However, if at the outset someone like Jack or Colin, who finds eye contact hard, may also find prolonged introductory social time difficult, creating anxiety about taking part in the actual learning to follow. There is a risk that their peers’ distance themselves because they guess, (rightly or wrongly), that person does not want to join in. Where the neurotypical majority do not know that this ‘full on’ joining in might be simply less attractive than getting on with the learning and thinking, this may constrain the development experience for those who find this harder than others.

Moving onto the learning event itself, group discussions create challenges for autistic people beyond the purely social. Different neurology and cognitive styles, combine such that some autistic people will need more time than peers to respond when facilitators pose questions or statements. Snap decision-making and responding do not accord well with autistic deliberative reasoning styles, which rely upon processing facts and context in a slower, often more accurate manner, at the expense of relying on instinct (Dvash et al., 2014; Brosnan et al., 2016). Feeling pressured to respond in group settings contributes further anxiety and withdrawal, a vicious circle when thinking about the impact someone has upon colleagues, sponsors and LDP facilitators. Conversely, when groups are set developmental tasks, different processing styles within the group are likely to result in a more complete solution. Misunderstanding sarcasm, jokes and generally not being able to easily ‘read between the lines’ impact group interactions with autistic people, e.g., talking over others, because they are having trouble reading social cues. The facilitators too, especially if unfamiliar with neurodivergence, may react negatively to someone who they believe is bored by their input.

Another common element of development programmes involves preparing and delivering presentations. Difficulties in reading facial expressions, sustaining eye contact, struggling to vary voice tone, can make for an unpersuasive presentation, irrespective of the quality of the preparation. Style may hold more sway than its content, however impressive or detailed this is, creating perhaps unintentional negative assessments of someone's leadership potential, especially where charismatic style is the prevalent norm.

Inclusive Managers

Managers appear to play an important role in shaping career experiences, unsurprising given they are positioned to guide employees towards promotions, signal their suitability for progression to decision-makers, allocate developmental tasks, discuss development opportunities, offer training and upskilling, source a mentor or sponsor, advise, persuade, and advocate for useful accommodations. The preferences expressed by Xavier and Tom show managers can find it hard to believe someone can thrive on routine, even though they enjoy high job satisfaction by staying within their role. Pushing someone towards what they feel counts as 'better' work, could easily create negative career outcomes for neurodivergent people. Managers may also assume that career progression will not be an option for someone who does not easily 'fit' the norm of perceived good leadership, based upon their communication style, liking for routine work or some level of social awkwardness.

CONCLUSIONS

Adopting a social-relational approach (Richards, 2015; Reindal, 2008; 2021) and building on extant literature exploring lived experiences of working people with hidden disabilities (Sang et al., 2016), this paper extends knowledge of how social constructions at work and real neurological differences, specifically those residing in autistic people, contribute to career challenges and opportunities, beyond the hiring process and adds to the career literature.

Identifying the many socio-cultural shapers of people management and development practices, this paper supports Roberson et al. (2021), showing that HRD processes, promotion decisions and the design of LDPs suffer from an over-emphasis on 'social' influence skills, at the expense of those associated with neurodivergent and autistic strengths. By uncovering the existence of normative assumptions about what makes for interesting and satisfying work and standardised views about career trajectories, the study supports Seitz (2022), in identifying that organisational career development processes are viewed through an ableist lens. In combination, these are likely to disadvantage autistic candidates by creating difficult and off-putting experiences.

The paper extends the finding that '*stewardship*' (Roberson et al. 2021) is a valuable leadership competence, adding the value of trust arising when a leader is direct and honest with their team members. It shows that managers value their autistic employees for excelling with detailed information, applying consistency and being direct, some of which have been covered in extant literature in relation to autistic strengths, but have been overlooked as abilities which are used in assessing potential for promotion and leadership suitability.

The importance of managers in shaping neurodivergent employees' career experiences has been established. Arguably this is the case for many employees, but like so many other

aspects of employment, findings indicate that this effect will be proportionately greater for neurodivergent employees. It has identified that managers can support inclusive career development simply by accepting difference and viewing neurodivergence as being a disability only where socio-cultural factors surrounding the neurodivergent individual combine to disable them, aligning with the social model (Bunbury, 2019; Barnes & Mercer, 2005). Managers who appreciate and understand difference are more likely than those who do not, to support career progression, depending upon their power, willingness and capacity to intervene. Managers may not know how to support, or do not want to, instead opting for an easier life, avoiding potentially awkward or difficult conversations.

The study shows that neurodivergent individuals doubt themselves as being suitable for promotion or for leadership roles, particularly in the social arena, creating a negative self-image impacting career progression. Contrastingly, they do not realise that their managers value their skills, especially direct style, flair for detail and candour in speaking out. This analysis encourages autistic people to recognise their talents explicitly and proudly. Where neurodivergent individuals are guided to take a balanced view of their strengths and challenges, they can use these to their career advantage. This is especially important where they may have already judged these preferences not as skill, but as unwanted by organisations.

Where organisations lack good neurodiversity knowledge, this limits career opportunities and impact development experiences for neurodivergent people. It can mean that talent planners and decision-makers do not recognise that qualities such as detail, directness, and integrity can count as leadership skills, and might expect that aspiring leaders display plentiful ‘people’ skills characterised by established leadership models.

Processes for appraisal, development and progression can deliver better career experiences by signalling more explicitly that different thinking styles are valued, encouraging applications in the same way as women and racial minorities have experienced. Using skills in this way is analogous to true inclusion (Nishi, 2013), whereby there is deliberate and genuine intent to discover and use diverse thinking perspectives. In summary, when operating HRD processes, including the design of LDP’s, organisations should consider how to explicitly value neurodivergent attributes, rather than seek to shape someone to fit neurotypical norms of skill, style and career preferences.

Transferring this work more broadly requires a much more diverse sample of race, gender and neurodivergence given all the employees were white autistic men. Given just one interviewee had a managerial role, future studies should uncover what it takes to develop neurodivergent people as successful leaders.

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