

Neurodiversity in the workplace: Building Toward Inclusion

Full Podcast Episode Transcript

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MAZI RAZ: Hello, everyone. Welcome to the Ivey Academy Podcast, where we discuss current topics in leadership and organizations, unpack the latest research in the field, and look at trends across different settings for insights to share with our audience. My name is Mazi Raz, and I'm the director of learning design and strategy at the Ivey Academy.

The members and staff of the Ivey Academy acknowledge the original caretakers and storytellers of the land on which we are situated. Those are the Anishnabeg, [INAUDIBLE] peoples. We commit to honoring and celebrating their past, present, and future. We also commit to working towards creating a just, inclusive, and vibrant community for all. We encourage you to learn more about the traditional territories of the Indigenous peoples where you live, work, and play. We are excited and encouraged to host this dialogue about neurodiversity in the workplace. This is a vast deep and highly critical topic. One that affects all sectors, industries, segments of the society, and corners of communities. In other words, everyone.

I have the distinct honor to introduce our guests and partners today. First, we have Jose, Jose is a business process intelligence program director at SAP and autism at work ambassador. Prior to his current role, Jose was global co-lead and head of SAP autism at work program in the Americas. Jose's 30-year IT career spans private and public sectors and companies ranging from startups to 50 enterprises.

During his tenure of 24 years at SAP, Jose has occupied positions in product management, consulting, development strategy, and diversity inclusion functions. Jose participated as panelist in the 2016 United Nations World Autism Awareness Day, testified before US Congress on the global challenge of autism, spoke at National Forum on Autism held by the Senate of Mexico, and collaborated on the topic of corporate social innovation at the World Economic Forum.

We also have Rob. Dr. Rob Austin is a professor of innovation and information systems and an affiliate faculty member at Harvard Medical School and Aarhus School of Business and Social Sciences. Rob is a friend of mine and the author of several books and has published widely in both academic and professional journals. He is an excellent educator and a distinguished researcher. In addition to his already busy life, Rob is currently conducting research on the topic of neurodiversity at work.

Last but not least, we have Dr. Erin Huner. Erin is the director of culture inclusion at Ivey, where she leads EDI Program in community engagement. Erin has a deep appreciation of the collaborative and restorative approaches necessary to open spaces and work alongside equity deserving students, staff, and faculty, and to build welcoming and equitable communities. Erin has deep expertise in implementation science and evaluation and has used this expertise in programming focused on equity, diversity, and inclusion as well as gender based violence. We are fortunate to have Erin at Ivey and here with us in this event. I am especially lucky to call Erin as a friend and a co-conspirator.

I'd like to ask Rob to help us get started. Rob, can you tell us briefly what today's discussion is all about, new diversity in the workplace. How can we make sense of that?

ROB AUSTIN: So I think at the heart of this topic is a challenge, a historical challenge, where there's a large percentage of the population that has not had the opportunity to have meaningful work in their lives. One of our doctoral students, Chloe Cameron, has written a little white paper where she made an effort to calculate the number, and worldwide, she suggested it's somewhere between 800 million and 1.4 billion who have some sort of difficulty with acquiring work, and it is not because they don't have the ability to do the work. So that's at the heart of the issue. The unemployment or underemployment rate for people in this category is often estimated at between 80% and 90%.

The good news, though, is that companies like Jose's company SAP are starting to do things about this. They've realized that the problem isn't really the people, it's with the business systems that we use to hire and manage. And so the challenge, I think, we're really talking about here, it's about reformulating hiring processes and management processes so that we can maximally activate the talent of not just people who identify as neurodivergent but probably everybody in the company. So I think that's at the heart of the issue.

MAZI RAZ: Thanks, Rob. That makes a lot of sense. I'd like to ask Erin to help us with one-- I think it's an important topic here. What are we mean by neurodiversity, Erin? Many people may not actually know what we mean by that.

ERIN HUNER: Yeah. That's a great question and a good place to start because oftentimes we use the word neurodiversity and I think traditionally most people, I think, have attached that possibly to thinking about autism or autism spectrum disorders. But the term neurodiversity is actually far more wide and broad than only thinking about people who may identify as having a diagnosis on the autism spectrum. So really, the technical definition for to diversity is really a brain that functions differently than a neurotypical brain and that can be across socialization, learning, mental health impacts.

But to give you a sense, some of those types of disorders that are generally thought to be within the umbrella term of neurodiversity are autism spectrum disorder for sure, about things like Tourette's, obsessive compulsive disorder, movement tic disorders, ADHD, ADD. So you can see a really wide range and then also we can add in different types of processing disorders. So how we learn and come to understand and take in information. All of those different ways of being in the world really fit under the umbrella of being neurodiverse.

MAZI RAZ: Impressive and thank you very much. Rob and Jose, have you noticed in your experience with neurodiversity common misunderstandings of it in workplace or within individuals?

ROB AUSTIN: I think there are some issues with tendencies to stereotype. One of the things people in the neurodivergent, who identify as neurodivergent like to say is that if you've met one person who's neurodivergent, you've met one person who's neurodivergent, right? We have to be careful. I mean, we are addressing a group of people who have characteristics that have prevented them from being hired or a mask their ability let's say, which are sometimes very formidable. But we do also I think have to be careful not to lump everybody into one category. The people who identify as neurodivergent are as diverse as everyone else. So I'd say that's one. Jose?

JOSE VELASCO: Yeah, absolutely. So I think that the definition itself also of neurodiversity. I think that Erin alluded to a wide variety of characteristics. I think that ADHD, autism, dyspraxia, dyslexia and some others are part of it. But I've heard people talk about left handedness as part of being part of

neurodiversity. I think as we evolve the topic over the years is going to have a crisper definition. But I think that you made an excellent point, Rob, in if one person who is neurodivergent you know one person who is neurodivergent.

In one of the trainings that we provide at SAP for managers, we talk about-- Well, our program is Autism at Work, where we have a purposely defined program to hire individuals who are on the autism spectrum. In particular, training tries to provide sensitivity to the managers. And one of the areas of sensitivity is precisely that every individual is as unique as everybody else, neurodivergent or not. In the example that I try to give a miss, if you find 15 things that define autism, it could be, for example sensitivity to light or literal interpretation of things.

Let's assume for a moment that there's 15 things, and let's assume for another moment that there's four of those traits that any individual can have at any moment in time. You can have as many as 1400 combinations, and it would be completely unfair and inaccurate to lump everybody in one category and define them as a group of people and provide them with accommodations and address their needs in a very monolithic environment. So spot on that thought.

MAZI RAZ: Thank you both Bob and Jose. This does makes a lot of sense. Jose, you've been talking about neurodiversity as a program inside SAP. What is the genesis behind the program that you have at SAP, how did it come about?

JOSE VELASCO: I think that we need to start in 2013. 2013 is when the official launch of the program was announced. It is a global program at SAP. Today, the program, just to give our audience an idea as to what the footprint of this program is, we are in 16 countries, we have provided approximately 600 opportunities for individuals on the autism spectrum. When we talk about opportunities, we talk about educational opportunities for individuals who might be in their student years, high school and college, all the way to full time and part time employment for individuals. And right in the middle we have internships, and we have contracting opportunities as well.

So again, 16 countries. We have approximately 30 different types of roles where we employ folks on the spectrum. These are not roles that we're pre-identified for people on the autism spectrum. These are roles where we had a need in the company, and we just happen to find an exceptional talent to fill that role, who happened to be on the autism spectrum. So we don't have a predefined set of roles for autistic people in the company. You apply because you have the talents, and you're given opportunity because you have the talent.

So the program today is in those locations and that is the general footprint. I think that one of the most salient points about the program is the area of sustainability over the last six, seven years, I think we're going to be talking a little bit about that in the next hour, but yeah, this is the general footprint of our program.

MAZI RAZ: Thank you do you recall in 2013 what dialogues were taking shape that gave birth to this idea, to this program?

JOSE VELASCO: Yeah, absolutely. I think that we had the-- like every other company out there, particularly the high tech space, they reserve I perceive shortness of talent, and I want to qualify that as perceived shortage of talent. I believe that if we are looking to certain profiles of individuals, and we have our blinders on, and we say this is the type of talent that I need in my company, yes, there is going to be a war for talent, yes, there is going to be a shortage of talent.

But if we open those blinders just a little bit and look in the periphery, we're going to find exceptional talent that we have not considered that before. And that's precisely the motivation for the Autism at Work Program. How can we tap into that underutilized source of talent that is abundant and that hasn't had an opportunity? Rob was mentioning 80 plus percent unemployment rate. These are the people that live in the periphery, but we also need to acknowledge that innovation comes from the edges, from the people precisely that don't look at the world in the same way as everybody else does. And this really was a huge motivation for us to start Autism at Work as well.

MAZI RAZ: Erin, earlier on you mentioned a phrase of the term neurotypical, do you think this is what Jose is talking about? This is very narrow definition of talent that fits in a very square box of typicality.

ERIN HUNER: Do you think if we trace even the idea of somebody being or presenting themselves as neurotypical? The data that would have presented that would have been the mean or median of a bunch of different data points, is that actually really, really a very narrow set of characteristics that anyone could at any time map themselves to. Even within the neurotypical brain, I think it's as diverse as the neurodivergent brain because how you express what is considered to be neurotypical, again, intersects with your life course, with the type of life you've had, the life experiences you've had, the education you've had. All of those different layers play a role in how we perceive and act in the world. Really, I think at the base of it, we all have neurodivergency within how our brains work.

For some people they say, as Josie said, as outliers. Within that median of data, we use to map our recruitment pathways, what we said was leadership, what we said meant working within proper modalities and work. But when you think about all the people that got cut out of that, you really have lost. Like Josie said, there is access to a very, very innovative, very committed, very diverse set of individuals, and it's for that reason, we have to shift both in post-secondary education and also then within workforce how we think about who and how we deliver our programming.

MAZI RAZ: Thank you, Erin. I'd like to get back to this part of this dialogue at some point that, why is it that the idea of neurotypical or this very narrow definition of what talent means for organization has actually been so prevalent and for a very long time has been the standard of hiring and the standard of development inside the organization? So I think it would be good-- actually we can come back to this a little bit later. This is raising an interesting question. From a point of view of a professor of management, Rob, I mean, you've been studying how organizations function, how they actually can function better. From that point of view, how do programs like what Jose is talking about autism at work benefit organizations?

ROB AUSTIN: I think there's a lot of ways. One of them Jose has already mentioned, which is if you have a talent shortage, and you widen the scope of people that you're willing to look at-- and by the way to Erin point too, I think the way we have taught in business schools, things like strategic human resource management are partly responsible for this, right? That we start with strategy, we figure out what capabilities we need to execute those strategies, eventually as we continue that analysis down, we end up with a checklist, right, of what we're looking for in employees. And the problem here is that those checklists historically have contained hidden biases, unintended biases I think. But hidden biases that kept us from accessing lots of categories of talent.

So one is-- that's pretty straight forward when I guess that you feel jobs it would have gone unfilled if you hadn't created a program like this. Another would be finding and hiring talent that is greater than the talent that you would have been able to hire through a normal route, and I'm pretty sure Jose has some

examples of this. And there are also one of the things we've seen out of research employee engagement benefits. So around these programs, people see the work that's being done and around these programs as meaningful, people want to be part of something in their work life that's meaningful and these kinds of programs get interpreted this way.

Jose also mentioned another one that comes up big in our research, which is innovation. That I think there's another explanation behind why these programs are increasingly important that has to do with innovation. In that sense, in an industrial economy where we were competing based on scale economies and efficiency, it was very important that everybody fit in, right? That because any sort of difference resulted in potential friction or inefficiency. And so it caused us in business schools and in business to evolve methods that tried to eliminate difference in friction.

The issue, though, is that in an innovation economy, it's not about that anymore, right? In an innovation economy, you can define an innovation as a valuable difference, right? Something different than what we've done or delivered before. In the company's ability to consistently deliver valuable inconsistencies, if you think about it, that's a reasonable definition for innovation. And so people, as Jose said, who think differently, we can help the innovation process by including people that think differently.

Another one is process improvements that arise from the ability and willingness to see problems and patterns in processes. So there's a lot of reports of people saying that doesn't work, and they're right, it doesn't work. And so they see those patterns and difficulties. There's a whole other category we call spillover benefits. And spillover benefits happen when we develop a solution for this particular program aimed at a group of people, hiring a group of people who identify as neurodivergent but then we discover that the solution works better for everyone.

And I know this is close to Erin's heart too that there's this idea of universal design. If we design for the edge cases or the outliers, then it turns out it usually works better for everybody in the middle of the distribution as well. So one of the common versions of that, we hear in our research across companies is managers will say, being a manager involved in this program has made me a better manager. I'm better at managing all of my people now and partly because of the things I've learned in this program.

MAZI RAZ: Rob, that was quite rich and many interesting aspects of this. One thing that I picked up was there's this one thing to think about recruitment and bringing people in from a talent point of view and there's another thing to think about what it means to fit in. And you mentioned, Rob, that Erin is thinking about the universal design. So let's go there for a second. Let's go in what it means to have programs are on helping people after they've been recruited to actually be included inside the organization and be a full members of the organizations? So Erin, I'll start with you. If you don't mind help us understand this notion of universal design a little bit better. And then I'll go to Jose to get examples of how this is actually playing out at SAP and these programs.

ERIN HUNER: So within the equity and inclusion work we're doing at Ivey, we really are trying to take a universal design approach to that work. And in particular, when we think about neurodiversity. But I think that you have to extend the idea of universal design right from recruitment all the way through the life cycle of the student in our organization. So through the recruitment pathway, how do you make that process more accessible to people? Because right now it's a very narrow set of parameters we use to even have people come through our doors. So how do you reform that pathway?

And then we're asking ourselves really serious questions about how do you reform what their learning environment looks like. So for instance, participation. What does it mean to participate? So when we think

about neurodiversity, we know that there are a lot of different ways that neurodiverse individuals participate with more or less comfort. One of the really dominant ways our classrooms work right now is on participation through what's called contribution, so you speak in. But that's only one pathway for communication. So what would it-- imagine if we rethought our classrooms that even we had a chat function. So if you were more comfortable participating in a chat or if you think about it within a work framework through a meeting by using the chat, and you have someone who's in charge of checking that chat to bring that conversation in, there's a space in a way that we've opened up more participation and access within our classrooms.

And then when you think about the skills that you're giving everyone within the classroom to think about managing difference, I think you're building more inclusive leaders who will hopefully then go on into roles within organizations and bring what they've learned about that challenge to what they think diversity looks like in the classroom into those spaces that they go to as careers. So I think when we think, like Rob said, the basic premise for universal design, we can boil it down to a few sentences is that you plan for and think about those most complex and vulnerable individuals in your community. And so you deeply get to know them, you deeply get to know where the barriers are for them within your current structure, and you work together collaboratively to think about how do we reduce those barriers together.

And I've been doing this work for a long time and I still don't have a single example of where we lowered a barrier by working with individuals who felt that barrier. And somebody who wasn't as complex or vulnerable came to me and said, well, now my life is just untenable, I can't do it. So I have never seen it that somebody who wasn't having trouble got a barrier because we reduced a barrier for someone else. So I really do think when we work collaboratively and collectively with those voices that can give us hints about barriers, we're really going to make, as Rob said, everyone's life a lot easier within the organization and increase everyone's access.

MAZI RAZ: Thank you. Jose, so the idea of programs that go beyond just simply recruitment and accessing a broader talent base but also figuring out how we can include them in the organizations. Rob, give us an idea that if we look beyond the efficiency argument and start thinking about creativity and innovation as one necessary phenomenal of organization these days, what examples can you share with us that how this plays out at SAP, and especially in your program Autism at Work.

JOSE VELASCO: I would like to share with you a number of examples that span, I guess, the whole experience from sourcing to a pre-employment training, the recruitment part, also the sustainability of the employees. And let me start first with the pre-employment training part, which I think is a very important one. And for our audience, I would like to ask a little bit of the process that we have at SAP.

So we have a pre-employment training program where we invite individuals, in this case, on the autism spectrum to participate in this training. And is one of those get to know each other. Experiences goes well, well beyond what we call the traditional interview. Traditional interview, what do you have? One hour to spend in front of somebody with a resume, you have the manager with the resume at hand, you have the individual, very nervous, trying to answer the questions in the best possible way to try to fit in into the culture and the needs of the organization.

So what we have established is this multi-week pre-employment training program, it varies by country, depending on the needs of the location and has been highly customized for each one of the different entities that we have in the company. But what I can tell you is that through this experience, we picked up

a significant amount of learnings. Let me give you one example of one that goes in the direction of universal design that Erin was highlighting a few minutes ago.

The training used to be four weeks on site all the time, and we always notice. And you probably will notice this too that there are going to be some people that are so actively involved in the training, raising their hand, making commentary. And then, we're not talking about people on the spectrum, we're talking about everybody. When you have a class that's basically, you have a certain percentage of people that are very active and certain people that are not so active. What we did we split up the training in two parts. The first one was at two weeks online and then the second was a two weeks on site. And what we discovered in the online part was that the people that were not so actively participating were much more active in the chat box making commentary or asking questions.

So what we ended up doing was moving that capability to the physical classroom delivery experience such that everybody had a Zoom front end in the classroom, and for those people that not were able to participate or not willing to participate because they were more shy perhaps, now they have the power of expression through this little chat box that allow them to participate as equals with everybody else independent of the different personalities. And I thought to myself, how come we didn't have this before? How come we always had the more outgoing people ask the questions and make the commentary, right? And this enriched the classroom experience tremendously. And it's something that we say, gee, wouldn't this be good for everybody in every setting that we have.

Let me give you a second example now moving a little bit towards the interview part of the process.

We've had situations SAP, where going to an interview, again, as I mentioned before, can be a challenging experience for people. So what we have done is we have created what we call an accommodated interview for folks on the spectrum. And one of the things that we ask is that the managers provide topics or even questions ahead of time. I want to throw out something out there to the audience. When was the last time that you went to a meeting and there was a panel of people asking you questions that you were not prepared for, where there was not an agenda and where basically you were being caught by surprise.

A lot of the interview experience for many people is like that. And I think that what we said, why don't we try to emulate a little bit more the real working environment in which a person on the spectrum or anybody is going to be working in? Why don't we people discuss the topics that we're going to be addressing in a very professional manner? We understand that the person will prepare. It might even be a case that we can discuss.

The experience has been transformational, and it is one of those things that I believe that if we were to take this experience and roll it out to the entire community, I don't know about you, but in my case if somebody would have given me the topics and the structure and even the questions ahead of time, I would have been much, much better at really providing not only what I wanted to just provide but for the interviewer to learn about me and may come more accurate and informed decision about the hiring. So part of the things that we have learned the Autism at Work Program, they have not been fully implemented yet. Mainstream at SAP but have really opened up our eyes to say, what if?

MAZI RAZ: Jose, am I correct understanding that what you're proposing is that for the most part, many of the interviewing processes, and not just at ACP in many organizations, they're particularly designed for a very specific type of an individual, very specific type of cognitive behavior, and then they are designed to almost catch people off guard and then see how people react in those situations. But taking a step back

and taking Erin's invitation to universal design at heart, we will actually start seeing differently how we can design these moments, design these interviews, design these workspaces and functions for people, for everyone to be included, anyone who is at any part of the spectrum. Is this a correct understanding?

JOSE VELASCO: Absolutely. And it's not only goes through the direction of the process itself. Let me give you one more example. I have a colleague of mine who is autistic and many people on the spectrum do not have the ability to look at you in the face or in your eyes and establish that eye to eye connection. I think they don't know this, but I think that we can make somewhere around 10,000 different expressions with our face, including our ears, eyebrows, nose, et cetera, et cetera. In the processing that goes behind that if somebody is looking at you, and it's a detail oriented person can be absolutely overwhelming. So when I was talking to this colleague of mine, who's absolutely brilliant and just wonderful human being, he told me in a nutshell, what would you prefer, for me to look at you and in the eye or for us to have a meaningful conversation? And I just will never forget that moment because I thought I can only imagine the so many times, right, that he has been filtered out of a job because of some of the biases that Rob was talking about earlier. These are things where I believe that our bias are filtering valuable resources out of our companies.

We have to change our mindset, we have to redesign our processes, and we have to redesign our mindsets to be able to really look at the talent for what it is. And if there is a hard handshake that you would expect for somebody because they are going to be around in a customer facing role or if there's that ability to smile all the time and so on, yes, that is an important trait for that role, but what if you're going to be doing some other job that does not require that but still you have the biases to include those things as part of the definition?

MAZI RAZ: Rob, earlier you were talking about this concept of the spillover effect. And when we actually we're thinking about these programs more intentionally, they have benefits in other parts of it. And one benefit that you talked about is that it just makes leaders better leaders and managers better managers. I think Jose is just giving us some interesting examples of how by looking at a way of including neurodiversity at work, our mindset, our mental processes actually become wider, and then they change. Is this what you mean by the spillover effect?

ROB AUSTIN: Yeah, I think it is. And along those lines, I think it's worth noting that the way that we approach-- when we teach a case about-- we have a case about SAP's Autism at Work Program, we have another case about Microsoft's and in some other cases still. But when we teach them, we teach them only partly under the heading of neurodiversity employment. More generally, we think of them as cases about how to manage people and talent. And so I would say, if you think about the fact that the world is optimized for certain people and then there's another group of people and, of course, it's a spectrum so that you may be further or closer, that they go through the world, a world that's optimized for other people, right?

Part of what we're talking about is trying to make the world more open and more optimized for everyone. And one of the things that we teach when we teach this stuff is that we think this is driving us along with the pressures of competing in an innovation economy towards a different style of management. And it's a style of image that perhaps you could characterize by saying it's more individual oriented. It accepts the person as an individual and asks the question, what do I need to do with each individual to maximally activate their ability to contribute. And that's a pretty good question for people who identify as neurodivergent, it's a pretty good question for people who don't.

One of the ways that we put this, and I say we, I'm talking about there's a gentleman named [? Turkel ?] [? Sono ?] who founded-- Jose knows him well-- founded a company that started things along this direction in Denmark in 2004. And he and I wrote a piece together where we argued that we really have to change the paradigm, right, and including some of the labels. So the one that we were picking on in this article was human resource management, right? And the quote that we used was-- we said that human resources, that even the phrase it sounds like there's valuable human stuff that we just happen to keep stored in containers called people. And we argued that's like calling the contents of an art museum paint resources.

And so I think we have to flip the paradigm. And there are managers in Jose's organization that are doing this. Jose, I'm forgetting his name right now, but he was the head of the service's organization. And he literally calls one of his employees on the drive and from work every day. Do you remember that example?

JOSE VELASCO: Yeah, [? Silvio Vesa ?] is a senior vice president.

ROB AUSTIN: Yeah and he credits this program, right? He says, this is when I started thinking I needed to know all of my employees individually, right? And to do that, he's got like-- the time I talked to him, he had like 500 employees. Every day he has like a half hour or 45 minute commute into work. Every day he calls one of them, and he talks to them about what's their world, right? And what can we do to make their work better, their life better, improve SAP around what they're doing. And when he finishes after 500 or so, he starts over. Jose, that was-- kind of stole one of your stories here, Jose.

JOSE VELASCO: No, it's wonderful that you remember. I would have not remember it Rob, thank you.

MAZI RAZ: You invited us to think about this as opening the world. So I suspect that the conversation we're having is not just contained inside the organization and if we actually start thinking about this, this is a dialogue about the broader society. Erin you work at the intersection of organizations and society. So how can you help us help this transition? How might we imagine these types of programs or initiatives and activities that we're talking about, encourage positive change, not just in organizations but to society at large?

ERIN HUNER: Sure. So I think that it's a complicated answer but I think it's a partnership answer. So we don't think we can do any of this work in isolation. And I think from the examples that Jose has given us today, you see there's this activation between working with people who identify as being neurodivergent, working with the managers who are going to be working with them, and then working to think about how do we redefine our structures such that access is increased.

And I'll tell you too. I mean, for everyone on this call, my son is neurodiverse himself. And being his parent has been one of the greatest teachings I've had because he's really challenged. Everything that I thought I knew about parenting, about patients, about education, about systems, that got blown out of the water when I had to start to really support my son to know himself so that he could be able to access the world that was in front of him.

And so I definitely bring him to work every day when I think about the work I'm doing at Ivey. And one of the things that I really think business school needs to focus on is challenging itself to think about, what does leadership mean? Because again, I think if we really think what's at the core of who we let in our doors and who we say we're pumping out, all business schools around the world say that they are graduating leaders of tomorrow. I think that's in every single one of our vision and mission statements.

Well, my challenge back then as a non-business person but a geographer is to say, what does that mean? What is the quality of leadership and how narrow are we willing to say that definition is? Because as Jose has shown us, there are leaders that sit well outside that median that we have limited ourselves to. And as Rob has said, if we really want to innovate, we have to start bringing in more diverse ways of thinking about problems. I mean, any time I ask my son to think through a problem, he comes up with an answer that I never with the way my brain works would have come to an answer for. And because of some of his neurodiversity he has this incredible ability to have a laser focus on certain types of tasks. And when you think about how valuable that could be within a problem-solving team, you have to think about how do we start bringing that in. And so when I think about our classroom dynamics, we also have to start preparing neurotypical students to understand a real deep expertise that neurodiverse students in our classes bring to those team environments, and we have to start activating those. And I think more than anything, we have to start highlighting how important those leadership skills are to solve these big wicked problems that really face us in the world today.

MAZI RAZ: From my perspective risen is quite a bit with what Rob was saying earlier about it's a shifting paradigm about leadership, and we're going through the process of actually rethinking management, rethinking leadership, rethinking organizations and neurodiversity could be a very good context for us to start thinking very differently about ourselves, not just the others.

ROB AUSTIN: And Mazi, one of the other things I would quickly add to what Erin said is, I don't know what I read the newspaper, I think the world could use all the talent we can find, right?

MAZI RAZ: Yeah. I mean, I suspect you're also referring to this what's called the big attrition. These days everyone is referring to that.

ROB AUSTIN: Yeah. But you know big issues, big challenges, climate change, we need all that talent.

MAZI RAZ: Absolutely. Jose, earlier when you started giving us examples about your program and aspects of your program, you started with the recruitment then we got into the inclusion, and you also mentioned about sustainability. Can we go there? If you don't mind, can you help us figure out what it means to think about the effects of your program beyond just the immediate neighborhood of that inside the organization. The fact that it has in the larger organizations and what it takes for us to not just launch these programs but keep them going and keep them growing.

JOSE VELASCO: Absolutely. So that's a two part question. I believe the first part has to do with the impact outside of the organization. When we launched the program, we launched it with the vision of bringing in the best talent that we could into the organization. And I think that we saw some wonderful results. One thing that I failed to mention earlier was that on the innovation side, we at SAP have an award that is given to an employee or employees who have created innovation that is just worth recognizing. We are a company who is in 190 countries. So you can only imagine the amount of entries that we have in a contest like this.

In 2019, we had a winner and it was the first time that only one person won this recognition. In the past there have been teams of maybe six or 10 or as many as 15 people. So in 2019, the person who won it was Nicholas Neumann. He was hired through the Autism at Work Program. He is a neurodiverse program, and he won the first place in this incredible recognition. He was flown to our headquarters in Germany and presented this award. I'm going to guess in front of 10,000 people by our CEO. So that's one of the areas again that I want to highlight about some of the great outcomes of the program.

But looking outside of the organization, I think is super important, Mazi, to highlight that we did not start the program with the idea of announcing it and sharing it as part of the principal outcome with the community. That was a side effect that we of course super gladly share with the community of companies. We've had more than 700 organizations that have reached out to us interested in how to implement a program like this. We have interacted with high schools, with universities, with NGOs, with government. So this type of program touches so many aspects of society and so many aspects of life, particularly for the individuals and the families that are part of the program.

I can give you a couple of examples. I mean, a very tangible one. Many of our colleagues were unemployed when they first came to SAP. I would say in excess of 95%. Many of those colleagues were perhaps on government services. And of course, that was something that the government had a monthly payment perhaps of a certain amount or allocation of money to help them support themselves. Now, they come to a company like SAP they get employment. So we are transitioning from getting funding from the government to one where they are contributing via tax base to the country, OK?

And it's a very, very important element for the individual because one of my colleagues I remember telling me, you have no idea how proud I am to be paying taxes. I don't think that I had heard that from anybody that I know telling me how proud I am to be paying taxes. But that's a very deep statement. It really tells you about the dignity of work, about the source of pride, but also about the benefit that programs like this have in the larger community.

We talked to high school teachers that have come to us and we literally went through the front door, went to the reception area, and ask who is running the Autism at Work program because we'd like to see, we can learn what you guys are doing so we can bring this back to the high school, OK? And teach high school students to be successful so they can go to university those who want, right? Or to get a job. So again, the topic of impact in the community is probably one of the larger ones, one of the most rewarding ones and I think that one of the most-- or the least expected ones that we had when we launched the program.

MAZI RAZ: I got goosebumps when you said that, and it actually it's such a human thing to think about. I want to get to this piece in a second that and its piece is this that so far we've been making a good case, I suspect a very solid case about neurodiverse in the workplace, on the dimensions of employment, on dimensions of innovation, and on the dimensions of essentially reaching talent to solve some very wicked problems as Erin called them. I think that there is a human argument to be made about this as well. Erin, I'd like to bring you involved in that topic in a second. Before I go there, I noticed one thing, Jose, that as you were talking about the progression of your program, I suspect the dimensions or the meaning of success might have changed. Would you consider it a success in the program early on has completely evolved, how do you currently define the success of your program?

JOSE VELASCO: I think that's an excellent question. I think that from my personal perspective, the success of the program, and we need to recognize that programs are typically transitional elements of organizations to achieve a goal not permanent fixtures. So in that light, I believe what is most important for this program is to the extent possible for it to disappear. Why is that? Because by disappearing, hopefully, we would have baked in all of the learnings from the program into the standard processes, changing the DNA of the organization.

And I think in my opinion, what we really want to do with these types of efforts is for them to come in, to be instantiated, to implement, to transform the organization, and, yes, to have a run maintain office that

takes care of continuous improvement. But in the end, I think that by having them baked in into the organization, we no longer will be addressing autism, or dyslexia, or dyspraxia, we are going to be addressing in accommodating for human. And I think that is really the ultimate objective of this.

MAZI RAZ: Totally agree. Erin and Rob and some last minute comments. Erin let's start with you.

ERIN HUNER: Yeah. I mean, I think your last point Jose, I don't know if I can add anything to make it any more moving. But I think this work is deeply about what we owe one another as human beings and what we all subsets of human beings. Because for far too long we've limited ourselves in defining the value of human beings based on the narrow ways they mapped these predetermined ideas, which are deeply biased and have attachments between what we say value and impact are along these very, very narrow lines.

And I suppose an impassioned plea as a mom of somebody who I wants to be productive as a human being and sees value in himself as a human being. I want to work hard so that those places he goes see his value and say you belong here so that he too can pay taxes and feel those deeply valued moments of knowing that he's mapped into our culture and our work and the way we are as a community, rather than being relegated outside of was invisible boundaries that he's never quite sure how they got put up in the first place, but he definitely feels that they're a barrier to access.

And so if we can start by changing the post-secondary system because that's a really big jump to then being career ready, we need to do a heck of a lot of work at the post-secondary level to ensure that the educational and learning environments we provide not only decrease those access points, but in doing so, I think they challenge everybody's understanding and expectation of how actually diverse the world will be when they go into work. And if we don't continue to challenge those expectations, I don't know how we're going to make change when we think about the next phase, which is that work and integration.

MAZI RAZ: Thank you, Erin. Rob, Erin is inviting us in the post-secondary institutions to take this seriously and to think about our role in shaping the future reader leaders. What advice would you have as an educator, as a researcher for current leaders who are inside the organizations that they want to somehow start on this journey, what might you provide them in terms of advice?

ROB AUSTIN: So I think first I would say dare to do it. They're not all organizations have been as brave as-- I mean, we have to recognize that companies like Jose's when they-- first multinational that I know of that started a program like this and that's 8 years ago now. I've talked to other companies that they get tied up in fear or legalisms or whatever. So the first thing is dare to do it.

The second thing is talk to people like Jose, right? There's actually a growing body of knowledge. We're trying to develop as part of our project, we're trying to develop intellectual capital around this topic so that we can teach-- every business school student in the world should understand the importance of this topic and what the contribution can be from thinking about it. So I would say that's another part.

I think the last thing that I might say is just to say that there's also a lot more opportunity to do good along these lines. So this is actually trending very favorably. I think a lot of people have followed the example of SAP and Jose Velasco. But I think the others need to realize is that number that I started with. 800 million to 1.4 billion is a really big number, and we've really just gotten started.

And so you know there's a lot more work to do, especially-- I mean, Jose and company, Microsoft, there have been a lot of software engineers hired, there but a lot of data analysts and cybersecurity analysts and so forth. But we've been interviewing companies that are doing great things with, first, front line

manufacturing employees, who are also really good at what they do, right? And it's not just something for the tech industry, it's not just something for high skill level jobs. There's a lot of opportunity here.

MAZI RAZ: Rob, your invitation, dare to do it is very, very valuable and I'll join that. Rob, Erin, and Jose, thank you so very much. This has been an incredibly generous dialogue that you've had and quite insightful. Thank you very much.

Thank you for tuning in and listening to this episode. We'd like to extend further thanks to our guests Jose, Erin, and Rob for taking the time to share their insights and experience with us. Additionally, I'd like to thank Melissa Welsh, our associate director of alumni relations at corporate development, for her tireless efforts behind the scenes to bring these current and learning events and episodes to life.

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