SUPPORTING WORKERS WITH NONAPPARENT DISABILITIES

AUGUST 2023
EN:INSIGHTS FORUM
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

SHRM® EXECUTIVE NETWORK

The August 2023 EN:Insights Forum discussed new SHRM research examining the challenges faced by workers with nonapparent disabilities. Nonapparent disabilities are physical, mental or neurological conditions that aren't obvious but can limit a person's movements, senses or activities. This category includes many types of neurodivergence, including attention deficit disorder, dyslexia/dysgraphia and autism spectrum disorder, as well as conditions such as chronic pain disorders, diabetes and more.
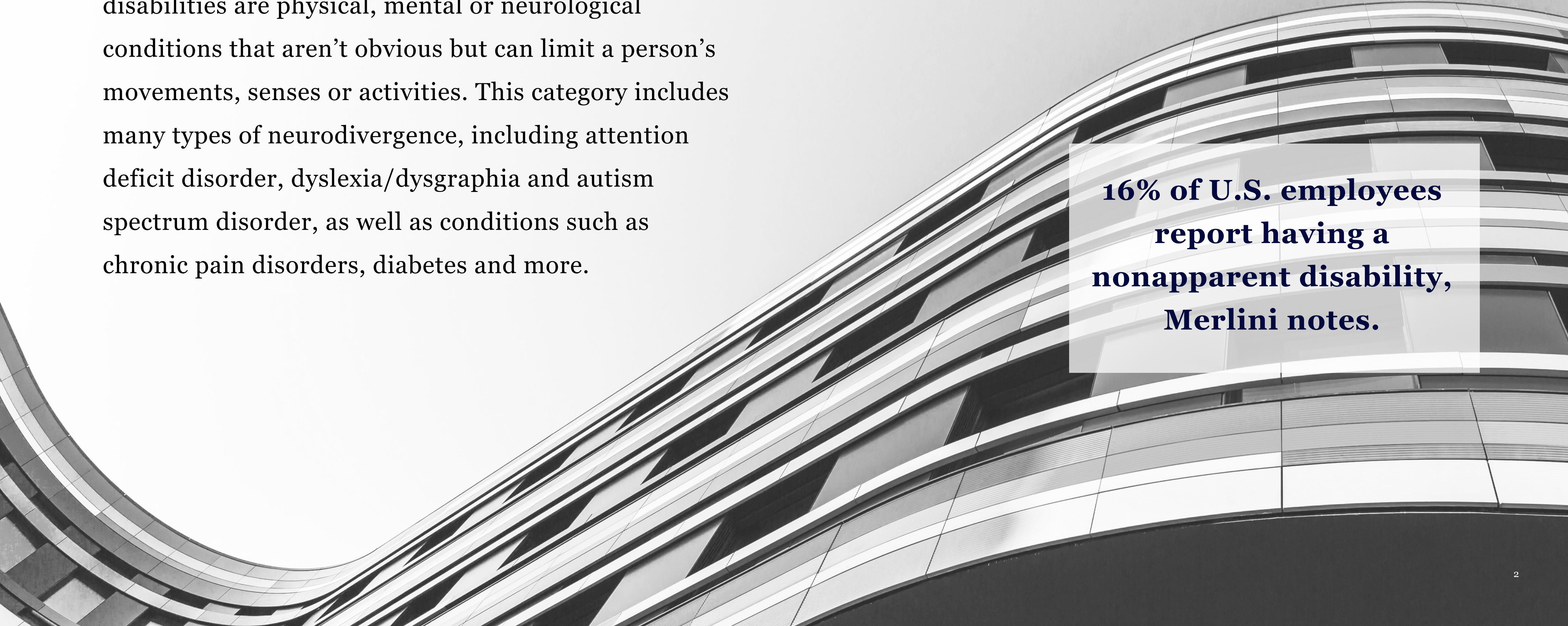
16% of U.S. employees report having a nonapparent disability, Merlini notes.

REPORTED NONAPPARENT DISABILITIES:

Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADD; ADHD)	62%
Anxiety	13%
Dyscalculia/Dysgraphia/Dyslexia	10%
Autism/Autism Spectrum Disorder	9%
Depression	7%
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)	4%
Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)	2%
Diabetes	2%
Tourette Syndrome	2%
Bipolar Disorder	2%
Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD) or Dyspraxia	1%
Neuropathy/Nerve Damage/Nerve Pain	1%
Fibromyalgia	1%
Multiple Sclerosis (MS)	1%
Other/Did Not Specify	10%

"Picture the people you work with," said SHRM Senior Researcher Katie Merlini. "For every 10 people you just pictured, at least one of them is likely to have a nonapparent disability. You're likely working with several people who have nonapparent disabilities. If you're working in a large organization, you may be working with enough people with nonapparent disabilities to fill a whole department."

These workers are about twice as likely to feel excluded or want to quit at least once a week, much more frequently than those without nonapparent disabilities. This is an area where organizations may be at risk of losing key talent, she notes, but low disclosure rates mean HR leaders may not realize there's a problem.

To disclose or not to disclose:

About half of employees with nonapparent disabilities **(47%)** don't disclose their condition to anyone at work, the research found. Being able to disclose, however, is associated with a greater feeling of authenticity at work, which suggests that the employees who don't disclose feel that they're forced to hide part of their identities when they're at work. In addition, the supervisors and managers of workers who don't disclose their nonapparent disability run the risk of wrongly attributing performance issues to the employee's skills or motivation, rather than the disability.

OF THE 53% OF EMPLOYEES WHO DID DISCLOSE THEIR DISABILITY:

- **4 in 10** employees disclosed to their work group.

- **3 in 10** employees disclosed to their supervisor.

- **1 in 10** employees disclosed to HR.

OF THE 47% WHO DIDN'T DISCLOSE THEIR DISABILITY:

- **1 in 3** believe co-workers would
  - Scrutinize their behavior.
  - Assume they can't do their work.
  - Talk behind their backs.

- **1 in 5** believe they would not be promoted.

Are those fears rooted in reality? "Unfortunately, evidence suggests they may be," Merlini said. "We found that employees with nonapparent disabilities who disclosed were two to three times more likely to experience workplace incivility, such as being interrupted and ignored, at least once per week. There were no significant differences between those with nonapparent disabilities who didn't disclose compared with those without nonapparent disabilities. We're only seeing worse incivility for those who have disclosed."

Incidents of workplace incivility:
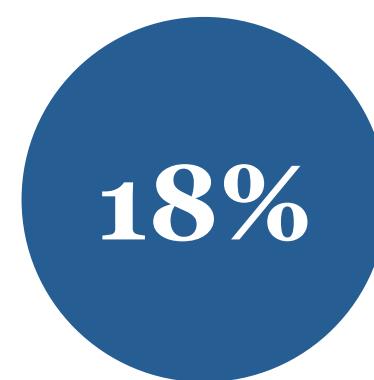
18% of workers who disclosed a nonapparent disability were ignored at least once a week.
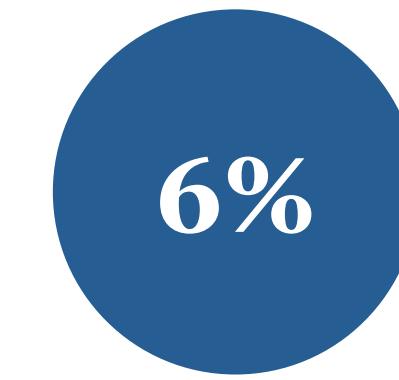
6% of workers without a nonapparent disability were ignored at least once a week.

21% of workers who disclosed a nonapparent disability were interrupted at least once a week.
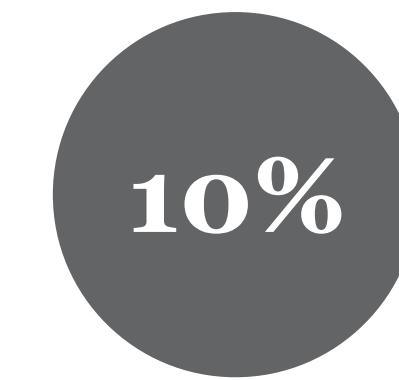
10% of workers without a nonapparent disability were interrupted at least once a week.

56% of workers with a nonapparent disability received leadership opportunities.
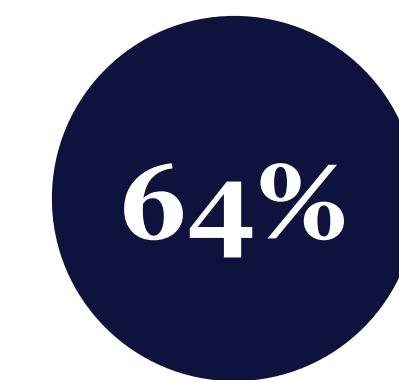
64% of workers without a nonapparent disability received leadership opportunities.

"Regardless of disclosure, employees with nonapparent disabilities were still less likely to be given those opportunities to develop and display their leadership skills," Merlini said. "Over time, that can lead to financial and career inequity."

A 'Catch-22' situation: When they don't disclose, employees with nonapparent disabilities may not get the support they need on the job to perform at their best. But if they do disclose, they risk being treated differently.

Said Merlini: "Ultimately, employees with nonapparent disabilities are facing unjust barriers to performance, to inclusion and to equity."

KATIE MERLINI
SHRM SENIOR RESEARCHER

What's the impact?
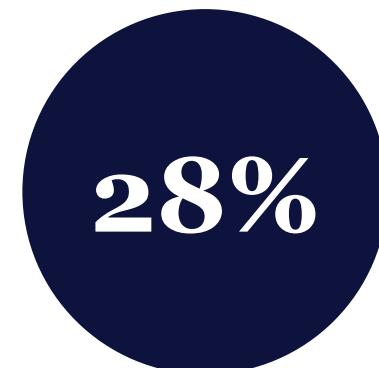
28% of workers with nonapparent disabilities want to quit at least once a week.

16% of workers without nonapparent disabilities want to quit at least once a week.
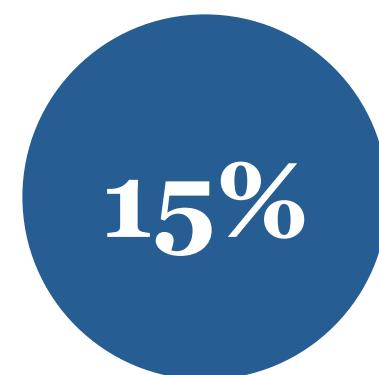
15% of workers with nonapparent disabilities feel excluded.
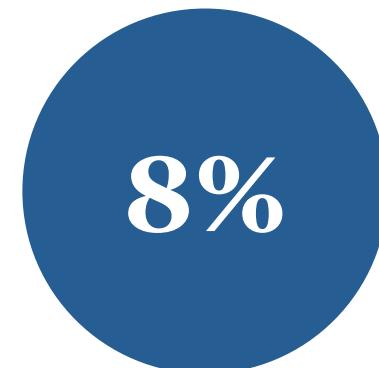
8% of workers without nonapparent disabilities feel excluded.

"Remember—we're thinking about at least 1 in 10 of your co-workers here," Merlini said. "They're about twice as likely to feel excluded or want to quit at least once a week. This is very frequent compared to those without nonapparent disabilities. Workplaces may be losing the battle for inclusion and are at risk of losing key talent here."

What can HR leaders do? Consider neurodivergent thinking an asset:

"We know that organizationwide efforts to foster empathy and understanding are areas for improvement for many organizations," Merlini said, "especially learning about that spiky profile of capabilities that neurodivergent people have, and how that profile can truly be an asset for various companies. So ultimately, we see a lot of room for improvement when it comes to simply educating others about different forms of nonapparent disabilities."

1. FOSTER EMPATHY AND UNDERSTANDING:

As of 2020, **4 in 10** organizations offered programs for disabled employees.

Today, **2 in 10** organizations include mental health in IE&D-related efforts to a great extent.

Today, only **1 in 10** organizations include neurodiversity in IE&D-related efforts to a great extent.

2. CHAMPION FLEXIBLE WORKPLACE POLICIES:

Flexible work hours are effective when an employee is in pain.

Remote work helps employees work in different ways.

Employees may benefit from being able to work at their own pace.

3. PROVIDE REASONABLE WORK RESOURCES:

Simple workplace resources are the second most frequently cited helpful accommodation.

Example: Noise-canceling headphones help avoid distractions when not working with others.

Example: A quiet room can allow an overwhelmed worker to take a deep breath and focus on tasks.

The most common theme for helpful workplace accommodations was work flexibility, such as allowing for breaks, being able to work at one's own pace, working from home and having time off. The next most common theme was having reasonable work resources, including specialized equipment, simple assistance such as written task lists as opposed to verbal instructions, and modifications to the work environment such as dimmed lights or darkened computer screens.

"I've yet to encounter any organization where some form of flexibility can't be institutionalized," Merlini said. "Flexibility is desired by many employees, right? And we know quite well that autonomy is enabled by flexibility, and autonomy is a huge motivator for employees."

Merlini added that many accommodations could also benefit a larger group of employees, a phenomenon known as the "curb-cut effect," in which disability-friendly features end up being helpful to a larger population. For example, the small, inclined ramps at the curbs of sidewalks designed for wheelchair users are quite handy for anyone with a rolling suitcase or shopping cart.

"People aren't asking for a lot here, and what they're asking for are things that many employees prefer and can use, as well. I use noise-canceling headphones whenever I'm in the office. The resources people request can be relatively inexpensive and probably within reach of most organizations."

Immediate action: Join SHRM in taking a pledge to build better, more equitable and inclusive workplaces for workers with disabilities.

Employers Can Empower Inclusion:

With an education in organizational psychology as well as counseling, Marjorie Morrison has worked in mental health for her entire career, from private practice and hospital work to designing counseling programs for the Marine Corps. This led her to launch PsychArmor Institute, which offers free online courses to military service members and their families. Most recently, she co-founded Psych Hub with former U.S. Rep. Patrick J. Kennedy to connect mental health practitioners, consumers, and allies with online education and connection to care.

Morrison is a Licensed Marriage Family Therapist, a Licensed Professional Clinical Counselor, a PPS-credentialed School Psychologist, and the author of *The Inside Battle: Our Military Mental Health Crisis*. She is a frequent commentator for major news organizations and has received many awards for her advocacy and leadership.

MARJORIE MORRISON
Psych Hub CEO

Q & A WITH
MARJORIE MORRISON

Q: **What should workplaces understand about supporting workers with disabilities?**

A: One thing that we have found is that different areas of occupations and companies have very different needs. We're a big believer in the idea that everybody needs to support those around them. If you're in transportation, that's going to be a very different conversation than it might be in a finance company or if you're in retail. It's important to realize that no two companies look the same, which means that no two solutions can really look the same.

I'd say the first thing is to look at your organization and start with what's working well, because that's how you best know your company. Different versions of employee resource groups in mental health can be innovative, and they have the feel of the company because it's a cross-section of different people. Those ERGs are a really good place for you to learn about what's needed and what's not needed.

The trick is to look within your employee base, look at what's working and then at what's not working. You can put a survey out, have a conversation and ask for "hand raisers." I can tell you, if someone isn't having a mental health issue themselves, it's almost certain they have to support someone that does, whether it's a colleague or a neighbor or a child or a parent or a sibling. And so these are issues that really affect all of us.

Q: **How do you balance accommodations with the risk of degraded performance?**

A: That is one of the hardest things to do, and it's almost impossible to get it right. Start with really listening. Listening is the key in all of this because, when you listen to the employee, you're going to be perceived as empathetic and that you're an ally for them. Once you listen, getting them to have buy-in in their accommodation is key. That accommodation has to be set up in a way that doesn't affect their performance, and they have to buy into that.

Where I think we see accommodation becoming a slippery slope is if those expectations aren't clear in the beginning, and then slowly, over time, it gets worse. Performance is really important, and it's important to put the company first. You do what's best for the company, and then you support your employees. And there really are happy mediums.

There will be times when a disability and the accommodation for it won't seem to be present at all, because of what the employee is going through at the time. Just because they have a condition doesn't mean that it presents all the time. They might need concessions for two months. So be careful not to make those plans too far in advance. Start with a 30-day trial and then check to see how that's working, so that you can establish clear boundaries.

Q: **How should companies be thinking about some of the conditions we discussed that are nonapparent disabilities in the context of mental health?**

A: I would think about it as being not so different than DEI. Mental health is physical health, so there will be times when you're going to have more depression or more anxiety or exposure to a traumatic event. For some people, it's going to be more, and for some people it's going to be less, but the reality is it is going to affect everyone.

I think one strategy that was mentioned in Katie Merlini's research is to make this part of the fabric of a company, so that everybody benefits from that diversity and from those stories and in creating that opportunity to be authentic and be your authentic self in terms of mental health.

When we think about this through the lens of diversity, it isn't just color. We're looking at everything—gender, size, clothing, geography and what kind of unconscious bias do we put on someone who lives in a rural location versus someone who lives in an urban place?

All these things are issues that we need to get educated about and then create a culture within the company that's inclusive of everybody's mental health as a safe place. I don't like to use the word disability here because it's almost stigmatizing Mental health is just part of life. How do we make a workplace support that and still be productive and get our work done?

Q: What mistakes do you see companies make in this area?

A: We've had to adapt really fast, and we're all going fast, but we also have to deal with old-school-style leadership that's like, "Nope, this is the way we do it," and the challenge is getting change to happen, right? Millennials, they're a whole different generation. I have three kids in their 20s, and I can tell you that they can't remember what color someone's skin is or if they're gay or they're straight, because they don't even see any of that. I'm so encouraged by what's coming in so many ways, but how do we move people who are stuck in their ways about things being done the way that they've always been done?

I think sometimes companies can get stagnant because leadership can get stagnant. I think the best solution is to bring in innovation in a way where they don't feel like they don't have a choice but that this is a good, exciting thing.

Q: How do HR leaders get more support from their CEO with these issues?

A: I think you need to treat it like any other proposition that you take to the CEO, where you need to have a strong value proposition, and you really need to have buy-in from the people in the company so that you're asking for something that the employees want and the employees need. You need to think about how to have the conversation to support the CEO, understanding where the CEO is coming from, understanding why the organization hasn't done this yet, and then giving a really solid argument.

Another thing you could do is say, "What if we do a three-month trial to just try something, and let's see how it works?" You don't have to make a big decision, but just a pilot project. And I would say these mental health ERGs are so great. I've seen so many creative ideas come out of them. If you can get a group of employees to come together and have them, come up with some solutions, then when you're talking to your CEO, it's not just you, you're representing the base of the employees and the creativity they've come up with. You also can ask for some buy-in with your employees, too, to ask, "What are you willing to give if we get this?" from the CEO.