

The Interview Process: An Autistic Perspective

Laura Needleman, AstraZeneca

ABSTRACT

Neurodiversity is an emerging topic within our industry. It is a newer diversity category that we as an industry are just beginning to understand and incorporate into Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DE&I) plans. Many companies understand there are many benefits to seeking out and hiring this talent. Topics include discussing various interview techniques and dissecting them from an autistic perspective. This presentation will also offer interviewing ideas that would better help to showcase neurodivergent talent during the interview process. I'll also be sharing my recommendations around providing interview questions in advance as well as formal skill testing as it relates to neurodivergent candidates.

INTRODUCTION

For those unfamiliar with the neurodiversity movement, what neurodiversity means is acknowledging and embracing differently wired brains, different learning styles, different communication styles, different thinking styles. Those individuals who identify as autistic would be considered "neurodivergent". Those without a condition falling under this umbrella would be considered "neurotypical". The movement is gaining momentum largely by the neurodivergent community themselves, advocating and pushing for more inclusive working environments.

When it comes to the interviewing process, many companies are beginning to recognize that the typical setting just doesn't work well for autistic individuals. Accommodations may be requested but that would require the candidate to know they have a disability, to disclose it to their potential employer, and also to know what they want to ask for in terms of adjustments to the process. Some companies have developed separate recruiting, interviewing, hiring, and management schemes specifically for autistic individuals. This is absolutely a necessity for certain levels of disabilities of which I will not focus on for the purpose of this paper. This paper aims to provide a different perspective in the hope that interviewers re-consider their interview styles and apply new ideas that could be more inclusive to all types of neurodivergent individuals (without the candidate having to disclose or to ask for specific accommodations).

WHY DOES THIS MATTER

If you take this in a larger sense, we, as a society, have been moved forward by neurodiversity. Different kinds of thinkers all working together to build collective knowledge and advancement. Fringe thinkers have always been an important part of pushing our society forward. Those who notice the things around them that others may miss. Our advancement has been, in part, helped by our collective neurodiversity.

Your company and its employee base, no matter how big or small, you could say is its own purposely created micro-society. Neurodiversity still remains as important in this setting too. How fast and far can your company go if it were to only employ individuals who are like-minded? Despite the importance of neurodiversity within our business entities, many neurodivergent individuals find it hard to get or maintain jobs.

If you've come to a place that you're ready to face this problem and want to move forward with intentional neurodiversity, one of the first places one might start with is to address the gate keepers. The roles which are involved in the screening and hiring.

How inclusive and unbiased are your gate keepers? How is their interview style inadvertently discriminating against the neurodivergent and how can we fix this?

DISCLAIMERS

For this paper I am specifically focusing on the interview steps. However, for us to talk about adjusting interview styles we need to assume autistic and neurodivergent individuals are being found and passing screening steps at your company and thus moving into the interview stage.

I know, I know! That's a pretty huge sweeping assumption to just glance over. You'll find the topic of embracing neurodiversity and how to filter that value system through a company is quite wide-spread. It can affect almost everything and requires rethinking of many already generally accepted practices in business. This is why it's best to address this in manageable discrete chunks.

For the remainder of this paper, I will be speak directly from my individual autistic experiences. I am part of the collective community of autistics but of course my presentation and experience does not represent everyone. However, listening to, absorbing and empathizing with lived experiences of the marginalized has an impact on the DE&I culture within your company. This is the reason for this writing decision.

LIVE QUESTION/ANSWER FORMAT

I come to you at a disadvantage when it comes to verbal articulation on the spot. This disadvantage becomes more apparent the more unsafe I feel. It doesn't matter how skilled or right I am for the job, if I don't feel comfortable to be my authentic self I am already at a huge disadvantage of processing speed, not only verbal processing speed of the interviewer's words but formulating coherent and accurate answers back. Add in a couple flickering lights or a squeaky chair, and I will just be further disadvantaged to articulate.

Take time to really think through and focus on how you could make the in-person interview as comfortable as possible. There are lots of ways you could do this, and this paper addresses several of them, but one of the most direct ways is to provide some, or all, of the interview questions in advance. If the questions were provided even just a few hours in advance, it would go a long way for a neurodivergent candidate and neurotypical candidates as well.

Let me clarify what I mean by this. One of the biggest pitfalls for me as an autistic individual are the behavioural and recall type questions; the "Tell me a time when" questions or "What would you do if ..." questions. Having to recall the past on the spot and tie it into a positive theme that would leave a good impression is difficult but especially difficult for those like me with processing speed disorders. If you have open-ended discussion type questions, experience-related questions, or other questions that require recollecting something from the past consider to give these types of questions in advance.

Remember, these types of situational questions are usually hard to fake or google because presumably the answer ties into your specific industry and role you are applying for. Plus, with a prepared candidate who was given time to remember the situation from their past will be more able to answer your follow-up questions about it. A true discussion could be had instead of a single question and a single response. From this deeper discussion, perhaps lots of qualities about the candidate could be gleamed and all because you simply sent them those behavioural/recall questions in advance.

EXAMPLE

Here is an example of a short list of questions an interviewer might consider to send out in advance:

Come prepared with specific experience examples and be ready to speak on them:

- an especially challenging programming task;
 - What the challenge was and how you navigated it
- a significant professional achievement;
 - What your role was, what the challenges were, and how you approached it
- a specific time in the past when you've had to stay on top of a large volume of work and juggle a lot of competing priorities
 - How you approached it
- a time when you went above and beyond to get results.
 - What the situation was and what you did

Try this out as a pilot case on a round of interviews if you can, see how different the interview goes once you get to these questions!

SKILL ASSESSMENTS

We are in a technical field and of course skill assessments are critical. This is one area most interviewers have hang-ups about sending questions in advance. This is understandable, so let's talk about how we can interject inclusivity in a different way!

Most commonly skill is assessed during live question/answer format. I have been programming in SAS® for 16 years and, still, I do not do well at rapid fire skill questions. To compensate for this, my interview prep for highly technical interviews typically includes excessive googling of every possible SAS interview question I can find with answers (how's that for autistic honesty). I can spend hours doing this (autistic hyperfocus!), which means, if I pass your skill questions it wasn't a true assessment of my direct skills, it was a test of how your questions aligned with the "SAS interview questions" content that's on the internet.

Some companies are using formal SAS testing. Are you a good test taker? What if you are a great candidate for the job but on-the-spot formal testing is just a nightmare scenario. For me, if the test is proctored where I can physically see someone watching me or I have to keep my camera on, Freddy Kruger might as well burst through the door because I am in full meltdown nightmare land at that point.

I'm a deep diver. I love to dig into something and present conclusions in a non-technical way. I like to say I'm a deep thinker not a quick thinker. For me, the best way to showcase my skills would be to give me some anonymised data with a couple programmatic questions to answer, also called a case presentation type of interview.

Case presentation interviews come in two styles: all work done at home by a deadline and the interview is just the presentation of the analysis and results or the candidate would prepare the entire analysis and conclusion in real time during the interview. In the first case, your candidate would come prepared to the interview ready to walk you through their code, explaining each step, and then formally presenting conclusions either verbally or written. In the second case, the case study documents and information may be given prior to the interview, but the analysis and conclusions would all be done live with the interviewer present.

Between the two, my best version is going to present in the first case. In this type of case presentation style, I am allowed to let my brain operate as it will naturally which is via a nice deep dive at a longer pace that works for me. We can have fruitful and more meaningful conversations about how I approached the problem where together we can look into all aspects of what I've come prepared with.

In the latter approach where the work is being done live, it leaves considerably less time for discussion. In addition, I know doing technical work with the pressure of being timed and/or being watched most likely will disable me.

Related to those types of skill assessments, I have an openly ADHD friend who told me they would not appreciate case presentation interview style. They simply don't have the time or motivation to do this in preparation for an interview and they were also concerned there may be ulterior motives to doing this (free work). They would much prefer to just answer questions live with the interviewer. This is perfectly fine and absolutely the point of this section!

What works best for me may not work for someone else and this fact is true even within the neurodivergent community.

FLEXIBILITY

There are numerous ways to assess a candidate's skill and we have described several of them here, but what is uncommon is giving the choice over to the candidate. If you want inclusivity for neurodivergent individuals this needs to change.

All you need to know as an interviewer – is this candidate skilled to do the job. Does it really matter HOW they prove that to you? Imagine giving your candidates a choice for showcasing their skills to you: live question/answer, formal testing, take home case study, in-person case study, topic showcase, a combination of options, etc.

Of course, the company time that would need to be spent creating these various avenues can be daunting. However, we can't keep assuming interviewing is one size fits all. If you know (and since you are reading this you do) that always assessing skill via live question and answer will inevitably disadvantage a subgroup of potential candidates, why not address it?

If you want the benefits of a neurodiverse staff, don't force all potential candidates through the same door (interview)! Giving your candidates a little power in interview style choice can go a long way in having a successful interview. It also sends a pretty powerful message about your companies' devotion to inclusivity and diversity!

SENSORY CONSIDERATIONS

If the interview is in-person, considering the sensory aspects of the interview environment will go a long way for neurodivergent individuals you interview. Choose an interview space that has limited sensory triggers.

Sit in the space at various times of the day and note distractions. You may not be able to pick up on them all so I suggest having all interviewers do this and provide notes on the space.

Do you hear people talking even though the door is shut? Is there a window with no shade? Are the lights bright, dim, flickering or buzzing? Do the chairs squeak at the slightest movement? Can you hear the breakroom from inside?

If you are planning to do the interview remote, you can even do this exercise at home. When you have your camera on, is your integrated background distracting? Does it flicker a lot because you move? Or if you don't use an integrated background, how is your natural background? Remove distracting things from the background view the candidate may see.

Reduce external sensory stimuli as much as possible. This will benefit both the neurotypical and the neurodivergent candidates.

CULTURE FIT

I have been in many post-interview discussions during my career and the question "Are they a culture fit?" gets thrown around from time to time. However, you can't look to hire for culture fit and be inclusive of

neurodivergent candidates. They are quite literally at odds with each other. The entire idea does a lot of harm in perpetuating unconscious bias against autistic individuals. Remember autistic and other neurodivergent individuals are additive to culture, they expand your culture. This is the heart of diversity, is it not?

The following is a list of behaviors that autistic individuals may exhibit which often leads to undue bias under the guise of “culture fit”:

- limited small talk;
- no handshake;
- too much or not enough eye contact;
- using stimming items;
- moving/rocking body;
- monotone voice;
- flat expressions;
- brutal honesty.

Let’s also consider if these mannerisms are necessary for the job that the candidate is interviewing for. Do they need to rely a lot on small talk (perhaps with clients) or be highly social, communicative and expressive? Then not exhibiting these behaviors matters more, but in a highly technical SAS programming role this really should not be a factor in hire-ability.

For me personally, maintaining eye contact has always been an uncomfortable experience. I learned to look at people’s mouths when they are talking and I often look down when I am responding. I recognize this mannerism could be off-putting but to do it another way could disable me via anxiety.

I am also a fidgeter and seat rocker. My random fidgeting and need to move has never seemed to interfere with my ability to do my job. In fact, it’s quite the opposite. I need to do these things to stay regulated. If I’m in a high pressure situation such as an interview, I especially need these regulating behaviors of mine.

Many autistic individuals have developed a pretty complex mask to combat this bias against our mannerisms. It isn’t just from our careers, this mask started in childhood when we repeatedly got the message from our peers that our behaviors are wrong. We are adept at hiding these behaviors and work very hard to appear neurotypical in our communication patterns.

However, there are massive downsides. Mental illness and autistic burnout most importantly, but as it relates to interviewing, if I am wearing my highly developed social mask to impress you during an interview, because that seems to be what you want, I am less able to access my deep thinking technical side of my brain. I am either working very hard to impress you with my “social skills” or I can bring my authentic technically capable self.

Which would you prefer to see from your candidates? Their temporary crafted mask that makes them more of a cultural fit, or the real authentic individual who could be additive to your culture?

DISCLOSE THE FULL PROCESS

Think about your company’s interview process. Once the candidate has passed initial screening after recruitment, where does it go next? How many steps, how many interviewers, are the interviewers paired? Is there randomness to the system? Maybe sometimes you include peers, maybe not. Sometimes its okay to do only one round interviews, other times not.

Put it all down on paper. Make sense of it. If you can’t make sense of it, your candidate won’t either and how does that look?

When you feel you have put together the current process as it stands, then ask yourself, can I share this with our candidates? Does knowing this process give something away about our decision matrix such that it would be biased to share it? Can you think of a reason it would hurt the process to be more open?

Hopefully you haven't thought of a reason, and assuming you haven't, share that process! Lay out the expectations, the steps, what levels they expect to interact with, how long for each, how long in between the steps, etc.

Not only does this greatly help autistic individuals to understand what exactly to expect, if you aren't at a point of offering any interview style choice, this at least gives the candidate room to identify areas that would not work for them. This will allow the candidate to ask for accommodations at the very least. How do I know what accommodations I need if I don't know what is to come during the process?

VISUAL PROCESSING

Another helpful tip, share the questions in writing at the same time you are speaking them. Many neurodivergent individuals are better visually, meaning listening to a question versus reading it can be processed differently.

This could mean providing the question in the chat of a video interview and then reading it aloud to the candidate to answer or if live captioning is available in your video conference system, turn it on! If the interview is in person, you could print your questions out on paper so they have a point of reference to read as you speak.

If your question is highly technical, let's say such as a specific analysis scenario about repeated measures but you need to first describe the visit schedule and maybe a little about the endpoint involved before they can answer, well, you could also describe it visually on a piece of paper or a prepared slide! Don't be afraid to get visual! Many autistic people consider themselves visual thinkers (as I do).

There is a great widget within Microsoft Teams called "Forms" that allows you to create questionnaires including pictures and media. Using this, or something similar, means you could prepare and then present your interview questions live to the candidate for them to verbally answer. You can also include any pictorial or more visual questions there as well!

CONCLUSION

If you have been interviewing for a while, think about all the times you had to make a reasonable accommodation for a neurodivergent candidate (or possibly anyone for that matter) because they asked in advance. I'm going to guess this number is quite low, if not zero. Neurodivergent people are either hesitant to ask for accommodations for fear of discrimination or they don't even know what to ask for.

If we are going to change the tides on autistic employment, the responsibility should not be on the incoming candidate to force the process to be inclusive. The responsibility should lay with the company searching for and deciding on their new employee.

The suggestions recommended in this paper might all seem like distant and unfamiliar concepts compared to our more typical approaches and also can seem awkward and unusual to implement. Remind yourself, it only feels unusual because neurodiversity is a relatively newer concept. We are breaking into new territory here.

And remember, changing your interview process doesn't always start with a wide-spread DE&I guidance on the matter. It can start right now, with you. When you start demonstrating that you care about these things, it has a way of spreading throughout the company. Show your fellow employees this matters.

Changing our thinking around having a more inclusive interview style will feel strange but hold tight to your neurodiversity convictions and know you are making a difference by adopting neuro-inclusive practices.

Once we know better, we should do better. Let's do better for our neurodivergent candidates.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

Your comments and questions are valued and encouraged. Contact the author at:

Laura Needleman
AstraZeneca
laura.needleman@astrazeneca.com