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Neurodiversity As a Sustainable DEI Practice: Redefining Human Resource Management Through Inclusive and Innovative Workplaces

Alakananda Misra
PhD Research Scholar, Sharda School of Business Studies, Sharda University, Greater Noida
Dr. Shweta Gupta
Assistant Professor, Sharda School of Business Studies, Sharda University, Greater Noida

Abstract
Neurodiversity has emerged as a critical yet underexplored dimension of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within contemporary organizations. While awareness of neurodivergent conditions such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia has increased, organizational responses often remain limited to compliance-driven accommodations rather than systemic integration into human resource management (HRM) practices. This paper reframes neurodiversity as a sustainable DEI practice that contributes to long-term organizational capability, workforce resilience, and innovation. Drawing on a structured review of academic literature, policy documents, and organizational practices, the study examines prevailing levels of neurodiversity awareness, perceived challenges and strengths associated with neurodivergent employees, and the implications for inclusive workplace design. The analysis identifies persistent gaps in managerial understanding, bias embedded within recruitment and performance management systems, and underutilization of neurodivergent talent. At the same time, the review highlights evidence linking neurodiversity to enhanced problem-solving, attention to detail, and innovation outcomes when supportive HR structures are in place. The paper contributes to DEI and HRM scholarship by positioning neurodiversity beyond accommodation, arguing for its integration into sustainable HR strategies. Practical implications are outlined for HR leaders, policymakers, and organizations seeking to move from symbolic inclusion toward structurally embedded, inclusive, and future-ready workplaces.

Keywords
Neurodiversity; Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI); Inclusive Workplaces; Neurodivergent Employees; Workforce Sustainability

Introduction

Organizations across the globe are increasingly prioritizing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) as part of broader sustainability and human capital strategies (Kumar, 2021; McDowall et al., 2023). While dimensions such as gender, ethnicity, and physical disability have received sustained attention within DEI discourse, neurodiversity remains comparatively underrepresented in both research and organizational practice (Doyle, 2020; Bernick, 2022). Neurodiversity refers to natural variations in neurological functioning, including conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and dyslexia. The neurodiversity movement challenges deficit-based perspectives by emphasizing that cognitive differences are a natural part of human diversity rather than deviations requiring correction (Den Houting, 2019; Hughes, 2021).

Despite growing visibility, neurodiversity in workplaces is frequently approached through a narrow lens of bias. Organizational efforts often focus on adhoc adjustments rather than redesigning core human resource management (HRM) systems to support neurodivergent talent at scale (Doyle, 2020; Hutson & Hutson, 2023). This limited approach restricts the potential of neurodiversity as a sustainable DEI practice and reinforces perceptions of neurodivergent employees as exceptions rather than integral contributors to organizational performance. Consequently, many neurodiverse individuals continue to encounter barriers in recruitment, performance evaluation, social integration, and career progression (Harmuth et al., 2018; Bury et al., 2021; Kidwell et al., 2023).

From a strategic HRM perspective, sustainability extends beyond environmental concerns to include long-term workforce capability, inclusion, and resilience (Szulc et al., 2021). Sustainable HRM emphasizes systems that align employee well-being with organizational performance while enabling diverse talent to thrive over time. Neurodiversity aligns closely with this perspective, as neurodivergent individuals often demonstrate distinctive strengths such as advanced analytical skills, heightened attention to detail, creative problem-solving, and persistence in complex tasks (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Hartman et al., 2023). However, these strengths are frequently overlooked or undervalued due to standardized HR practices designed around neurotypical norms (Lorenz et al., 2016; Wehman et al., 2016).

The gap between potential and practice is particularly evident in emerging economies such as India, where awareness of neurodiversity remains uneven and empirical research is still evolving (Sagar, Khera, & Garg, 2023). While available estimates suggest a substantial neurodivergent population, workforce participation rates remain disproportionately low, reflecting structural and cultural barriers rather than lack of capability (Chandrasekaran et al., 2021; Kumari & Lenka, 2023). Research indicates that managerial apprehensions regarding competence, communication styles, and workplace adjustment continue to influence hiring and inclusion decisions, underscoring the need for organization-wide awareness and systemic HR reform rather than isolated interventions (Sagar et al., 2023; O'Hara, 2022).

Although prior studies have examined neurodiversity from medical, psychological, and inclusion-oriented perspectives (Barnhart & Dierickx, 2021; Den Houting, 2019), there remains limited research that explicitly frames neurodiversity as a sustainable DEI strategy embedded within HRM systems. Much of the existing literature focuses on individual-level challenges or organizational case examples, with fewer studies integrating neurodiversity into broader discussions of sustainable HRM, workforce design, and long-term organizational value creation (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Szulc et al., 2021).

This paper addresses this gap by synthesizing existing literature to examine awareness, challenges, and strengths associated with neurodiversity in workplace contexts, with a specific focus on implications for sustainable HR practices. By shifting the analytical focus from accommodation to organizational design, the study contributes to HRM and DEI research and offers practical insights for organizations seeking to build inclusive, innovative, and future-ready workplaces.

Literature Review

Neurodiversity has gained visibility within diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) discourse, yet its integration into mainstream human resource management (HRM) remains limited (Den Houting, 2019; Hughes, 2021).

Research in the Indian context reveals managerial apprehension regarding the competence, communication styles, and adaptability of neurodivergent employees (Sagar, Khera, & Garg, 2023).Similar concerns are reflected in international research, where neurodivergent employees report experiences of social exclusion, misunderstanding, and isolation (Harmuth et al., 2018).

Recruitment and selection processes that rely on unstructured interviews and subjective assessments of "fit" are actually a deterrent to neurodivergent candidates (O'Hara, 2022). Such practices reinforce neurotypical norms and inadvertently exclude candidates whose strengths may not be immediately visible through traditional hiring mechanisms (Wehman et al., 2016; Roux et al., 2017).

Standardized evaluation criteria frequently rate interpersonal behaviors, adaptability, and implicit communication over task accuracy and analytical depth. Studies indicate that neurodivergent employees often experience under-recognition of their contributions, limited career progression, and heightened stress due to misaligned performance expectations (Kidwell et al., 2023; Pryke-Hobbes et al., 2023). At the same time, research highlights that neurodivergent individuals often demonstrate distinctive strengths, including sustained focus, attention to detail,

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analytical reasoning, and persistence in complex problem-solving, particularly in knowledge-intensive roles (Austin & Pisano, 2017; Hartman et al., 2023).

Studies examining the role of digitization and assistive technologies suggest that personalized learning tools, artificial intelligence, and adaptive systems can significantly enhance skill development and workplace integration for neurodiverse employees (Reddy; Tomczak, 2021). Ethnographic research further emphasizes the potential of smart systems and continuous feedback mechanisms to create responsive work environments that accommodate diverse cognitive needs (Khurana & Mandke).

Sustainable HRM emphasizes workforce resilience, retention, and the alignment of employee well-being with organizational performance over time (Szulc et al., 2021). Empirical evidence suggests that neurodiverse employees often exhibit high levels of commitment and task engagement, leading to positive outcomes in productivity and retention (Bernick, 2022; Hartman et al., 2023). However, these benefits are dependent upon organizational readiness, including inclusive leadership, supportive work design, and psychologically safe environments.

At the same time, scholars caution that inclusion of neurodiverse individuals without systemic support may place additional strain on teams and individuals, potentially undermining performance and well-being (Valkovicova & Tokuhama-Espinosa, 2021). Digital technologies and assistive tools have been identified as scalable mechanisms for achieving sustainability, enabling organizations to balance efficiency with individualized support (Bury et al., 2021; Tomczak, 2021).

Much of the existing practice focuses on awareness, individual experiences, or isolated organizational initiatives, with limited emphasis on how neurodiversity can be systematically embedded within sustainable HRM frameworks. Addressing this gap is essential for practical implementation of neurodiversity as a long-term, sustainable DEI practice.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a structured literature review approach combined with thematic analysis to examine awareness, perceptions, challenges, and strengths associated with neurodiversity in workplace contexts. The objective of this methodological approach is to synthesize existing academic and practitioner knowledge and to identify dominant patterns, gaps, and implications relevant to neurodiversity as a sustainable diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practice within human resource management (HRM).

A comprehensive search of the literature was conducted across multiple academic databases, including Google Scholar, PubMed, JSTOR, and Sage Journals. In addition to peer-reviewed journal articles, selected policy documents, organizational reports, and reputable newspaper articles were reviewed to capture both scholarly and applied perspectives on neurodiversity in employment contexts. This inclusive approach was adopted to reflect the evolving and interdisciplinary nature of neurodiversity research, particularly in relation to workplace practices and HR systems.

The search strategy employed a combination of keywords and phrases, including “neurodiversity,” “neurodivergent employees,” “autism spectrum disorder,” “ADHD,” “dyslexia,” “workplace inclusion,” “DEI,” “human resource management,” and “neurodiversity awareness.” The review focused primarily on literature published within the last ten years to ensure relevance to contemporary organizational practices, while selectively including earlier foundational works where conceptually significant.

Inclusion criteria for the review comprised peer-reviewed journal articles, empirical studies, conceptual papers, and high-quality practitioner reports that explicitly addressed neurodiversity in relation to workplace inclusion, HR practices, or organizational outcomes. Studies focusing on awareness, managerial perceptions, recruitment, performance management, learning and development, and technology-enabled inclusion were considered relevant. Articles were excluded if they focused exclusively on clinical or diagnostic aspects of neurodiversity without reference to social, organizational, or employment-related contexts.

Following the identification and screening of relevant sources, data were extracted and analyzed using thematic analysis. This involved an iterative process of reading, coding, and categorizing findings to identify recurring themes across the literature. Themes were not predefined but emerged inductively from the data, allowing for a grounded understanding of how neurodiversity is conceptualized and addressed within organizational settings. Particular attention was paid to themes related to awareness and attitudes, HRM system alignment, inclusion practices, and links to sustainability and organizational value.

As this study is based solely on secondary data from published sources, no primary data collection was undertaken, and ethical approval was not required. Care was taken to accurately represent original findings and to appropriately cite all sources reviewed.

Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis of the reviewed literature reveals several consistent patterns in how neurodiversity is understood, experienced, and managed within workplace contexts. This pattern indicates that while recognition of neurodiversity has increased, its translation into sustainable organizational practice remains limited.

A prominent theme emerging from the analysis relates to uneven awareness and persistent attitudinal barriers. Many studies point to limited understanding of neurodivergent conditions among managers and coworkers, often accompanied by apprehensions regarding communication, adaptability, and job performance. These perceptions, documented across both Indian and international contexts, contribute to cautious or exclusionary hiring decisions and reinforce deficit-oriented narratives. The analysis suggests that awareness initiatives, when implemented in isolation, tend to focus on individual sensitization without challenging deeper assumptions embedded within organizational norms and HR processes.

Another recurring theme concerns the misalignment between standardized HRM practices and neurodiverse ways of working. Recruitment and selection processes frequently rely on social interaction, informal judgment, and subjective assessments of “fit,” which disadvantage neurodivergent candidates whose strengths may not be immediately visible through conventional interviews. Similarly, performance management systems often prioritize behavioral competencies and implicit communication norms, resulting in under-recognition of task-focused strengths such as analytical ability, attention to detail, and sustained concentration. The literature consistently indicates that such misalignment limits both employment access and career progression for neurodivergent employees, while simultaneously constraining organizations’ ability to benefit from cognitive diversity.

The analysis also highlights the dual nature of workplace experiences for neurodivergent employees. On one hand, neurodiverse individuals frequently report challenges related to social integration, sensory environments, and ambiguous expectations, which can contribute to stress, disengagement, or masking behaviors. On the other hand, when work roles are clearly defined and environments are supportive, neurodivergent employees demonstrate high levels of task engagement, persistence, and commitment. This contrast underscores the role of organizational design in shaping outcomes, suggesting that challenges often arise not from neurodivergence itself but from inflexible systems and assumptions.

Technology and adaptive work practices emerge as enabling mechanisms within the literature. Studies examining digitization, assistive technologies, and personalized learning tools suggest that such interventions can mitigate structural barriers and support skill development for neurodivergent employees. The analysis indicates that technology has the potential to function as a scalability lever, allowing

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organizations to accommodate diverse cognitive needs without relying solely on individualized adjustments. However, the effectiveness of these tools depends on their integration into broader HR strategies rather than their use as isolated solutions.

From a sustainability perspective, the analysis reveals a growing recognition of neurodiversity as a contributor to long-term organizational value, particularly in knowledge-intensive and innovation-driven sectors. Yet, these benefits are consistently shown to be contingent upon organizational readiness, including inclusive leadership, psychological safety, and aligned HR systems. Without such conditions, inclusion efforts risk becoming performative or placing additional burdens on neurodivergent employees and their teams.

Overall, the analysis points to a central insight: neurodiversity is most effectively supported when addressed as a systemic HRM and DEI issue rather than an individual accommodation challenge. The reviewed literature collectively indicates that sustainable inclusion requires a shift from awareness-driven initiatives to structural redesign of HR practices, including recruitment, performance management, learning and development, and managerial capability building. This synthesis highlights a critical gap between growing recognition of neurodiversity and its meaningful integration into sustainable HRM frameworks, reinforcing the need for organizations to move beyond symbolic inclusion toward embedded, long-term practices.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based entirely on secondary sources, including peer-reviewed academic literature, policy documents, and publicly available organizational reports. As no primary data were collected and no human participants were directly involved, formal ethical approval was not required.

Ethical care was exercised throughout the review process by ensuring that all sources were accurately represented and appropriately cited. Given that neurodiversity is a sensitive and often misunderstood topic, particular attention was paid to avoiding selective interpretation or language that could unintentionally reinforce stigma or deficit-based assumptions.

The analysis intentionally adopts a strengths-based and systems-oriented perspective, focusing on organizational structures and HR practices rather than framing neurodivergence as an individual limitation. This approach aligns with ethical principles of respect, inclusion, and equity, which are central to both neurodiversity discourse and sustainable DEI practice

Limitations

This study is subject to certain limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the analysis is based on a review of existing literature and publicly available sources rather than primary empirical data. As a result, the insights presented reflect patterns and perspectives identified across prior studies rather than direct workplace observations or lived experiences collected firsthand.

Second, while efforts were made to include a diverse range of academic and practitioner sources, the review is limited to publications available in English and accessible through selected databases. Relevant studies published in other languages or within region-specific outlets may not have been captured. In addition, the evolving nature of neurodiversity research means that organizational practices and policy approaches continue to develop, potentially outpacing the published literature.

Finally, although the paper draws on studies from both global and Indian contexts, variations across industries, organizational sizes, and cultural settings are not examined in depth. Future research could build on this work by incorporating primary data, longitudinal designs, and context-specific analyses to further examine how neurodiversity can be embedded within sustainable HRM practices.

Conclusion

Despite growing awareness, neurodiversity continues to occupy a marginal position within mainstream human resource management and diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practices. This paper examined how neurodiversity is currently understood and operationalized in workplace contexts and argued for its repositioning as a sustainable DEI practice rather than a compliance-driven or accommodation-based initiative. Through a structured review and thematic analysis of existing literature, the study finds that while awareness has increased, organizational responses remain fragmented and individualized. Core HR practices related to recruitment, performance management, and learning and development continue to reflect neurotypical norms, limiting the effective inclusion and utilization of neurodivergent talent. At the same time, the literature consistently highlights the distinctive strengths neurodiverse individuals bring to organizations, particularly in analytical thinking, sustained focus, and problem-solving, when supportive systems are in place.

By situating neurodiversity within the framework of sustainable human resource management, this paper underscores the need for a shift from short-term inclusion efforts to systemic HR redesign. Embedding neurodiversity into core HR processes has implications for workforce resilience, retention, and innovation, particularly in dynamic and knowledge-intensive environments. The study also highlights the need for further empirical research, especially in emerging economy contexts such as India, to examine how inclusive HR systems shape long-term organizational and employee outcomes. Overall, the paper positions neurodiversity as a strategic and enduring dimension of DEI, offering a pathway for organizations to move beyond symbolic inclusion toward more equitable, inclusive, and future-ready workplaces.

Implications for policy, practitioners and future research

The findings of this review highlight important implications for policymakers, organizational practitioners, and researchers who aim to advance neurodiversity as a sustainable diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) practice rather than a short-term accommodation response. From a policy standpoint, there is a clear need to move beyond broad disability inclusion mandates toward frameworks that explicitly recognize neurodiversity within employment, skilling, and workforce participation strategies. Policies that support inclusive recruitment practices, strengthen managerial capability, and encourage technology-enabled workplace adjustments can help organizations shift from compliance-oriented actions to long-term workforce inclusion. Greater emphasis on sustained participation, retention, and career progression of neurodivergent individuals, rather than entry-level hiring alone, would better align policy intent with the principles of sustainable human resource management.

For practitioners, particularly HR leaders and people managers, the findings reinforce the importance of embedding neurodiversity into core HR systems and everyday managerial practices. Awareness initiatives are necessary, but they are insufficient if recruitment, performance management, and learning frameworks continue to reflect neurotypical norms. Practitioners should focus on clearer role design, explicit performance expectations, and building managerial capability to support diverse cognitive styles in ways that strengthen both inclusion and organizational resilience. A critical aspect of effective and sustainable support lies in fostering self-awareness among neurodiverse employees (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Hultman, et al., 2022; Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2023; First et al., 2019; South & Sunderland, 2022). Supporting self-awareness is most effective when neurodivergent individuals are actively involved in shaping support strategies alongside professionals, reflecting their lived experiences and evolving coping approaches. Employers and support persons, whether neurodivergent or neurotypical, play an important role by providing both proactive support, such as anticipatory adjustments and clear communication, and reactive support in response to emerging challenges (Müller et al., 2008). Understanding individual coping strategies and self-awareness journeys enables shared decision-making that involves neurodiverse employees, managers, colleagues, and, where relevant, external support networks (Bertilsdotter Rosqvist, Hultman, et al., 2022; Bertilsdotter Rosqvist et al., 2023; First et al., 2019; South & Sunderland, 2022).

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The review also points to clear directions for future research. While existing studies have explored awareness and individual workplace experiences, there remains limited empirical evidence on how self-awareness, organizational support, and HR system design interact over time to influence outcomes such as retention, well-being, and performance. Longitudinal and qualitative studies could provide deeper insight into how neurodiverse individuals experience and navigate workplace environments across different organizational and cultural contexts. Further research is particularly needed in emerging economy settings, including India, where empirical evidence on neurodiversity and sustainable HRM practices remains limited.

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