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Kendall Smith
Kennesaw State University

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Remote Working and Online Education Among Neurodiverse Individuals

by Kendall Smith

March 13th, 2020, was the day for Americans that the world shut down, acknowledging the Covid-19 virus as a real and deadly threat to the country as well as the rest of the globe. While the month of March proved seemingly hopeless, through April and May the country steadily regained itself and began to adjust; and though the adjustment was difficult for everyone, the impact Covid-19 pandemic had on traditionally marginalized populations was far worse. In fact, there was a marginalized community who faced the consequences of the pandemic, one that cannot be defined by skin color or nationality like the others: the neurodiverse community. As defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the term neurodiversity describes those whose brain functions differ from what society considers typical for everyone else. These include, but are not limited to, those with autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, and so forth ("Neurodiversity"). Despite these differences, during the pandemic neurodiverse students and employees were sent home and expected to resume school or work, like everyone else, on a computer screen. Unsurprisingly, this brought on challenges for these individuals, but also for the parents and caretakers who support them. Many parents observed their children struggle to get accustomed to online learning firsthand. By contrast, there were other parents who fully supported online education in the way it allowed their children to flourish academically in new ways. Similarly, these same opposing arguments continued into the debate of remote working for neurodiverse employees. A lot of employers, admittedly, found that their neurodiverse workers performed better in virtual settings. Conversely, other employers found neurodiverse staff felt isolated from colleagues and saw a decline in work performance in direct correlation with lack of social interaction. So, what does this mean for neurodiverse students and employees moving forward? Is technology an exclusively good or bad influence on the neurodiverse community? In light of the Covid-19 pandemic, I want to analyze the consequences and effects that online education and remote working had on neurodiverse individuals and what it means for their community going forward.

Online education presented numerous challenges to neurodiverse students across the nation. One of the most prevalent was the actual struggle to operate the technology itself. Students with physical disabilities, such as visual or hearing impairments, found attending virtual classes more difficult than those without them. In an interview with Ansley McGee, I asked her if she felt disadvantaged as a neurodiverse student with ADHD, autism, and a significant hearing impairment attending online classes at Oglethorpe University. She explained that due to her hearing aids, attending virtual lectures required more effort for her than it did the average student. Computer audio is often too low for her to hear, even with hearing aids, so she constantly has to have the volume on maximum; however, during the pandemic when other family members needed the silence to work or school at home, she would have to put in earbuds. Since using earbuds involves removing her hearing aids, this solution is about as ineffective as giving a totally blind person reading glasses (McGee). Besides technology, the traditional school structure that involved walking to class and engaging with teachers and other students face-to-face was lost. New at-home distractions appeared in their place. In class, McGee's ADHD caused her to be distracted by a pencil scratch or an occasional cough; at home, blocking out the background noise from other family members was nearly ten times as worse. She recalls, "I'm home with Mom all day because she's home all day, and Mom and I don't get along.…Everyone was all together in the front room, and if somebody had a Zoom call, they went in my room.…but we're all crammed in one room all day most of the time" (McGee). Furthermore, some neurodiverse students lost their motivation for school entirely in response to the shift to online learning. Peter, an autistic senior in Texas who had dreams of going to school for cinematography, was cut off from all outside communication after the online transition hit, and the enthusiasm he once had for school evaporated (Nelson & Murakami 110). McGee, whose academic motivation was already subpar even before the pandemic, found that online school only worsened her attitude: "I didn't want to do it. I already hated school and being on a computer all day just sucked the little motivation I already had completely out of me" (McGee). With no clear incentive to stay dedicated, a lot of students saw their futures slipping away; and although there were those like Peter who were eventually able to pull through with help from teachers and family and re-ignite their passions, there were many more who were not as fortunate. Once an aspiring actress, McGee admits that while she does not believe the pandemic can be blamed exclusively. She affirms that her online school experience may have contributed to her decision to pause her education and reconsider her future. Disheartened by the events of the past two years, she states, "I have no idea if I want to be an actor anymore" (McGee).

Taking into consideration these arguments, online school was an easy scapegoat to blame for the downfall of many neurodiverse students' academic success. After all, it is clear that for neurodiverse students, online education only seemed amplify previous problems, while adding new ones into the equation; but can we really blame it all on online school? Beau Neal, who has been invested in the world of online education since 2013, believes with unwavering certainty that online education was poorly received because it was "a direct result of imperfect execution by the school systems that struggled to adapt to a virtual format." He argues that "online education can offer an inclusive and discreet experience for special education students that optimizes their potential and boosts their academic performance, personal confidence, and overall growth as a student" (Neal). When given the chance, students who may have felt ostracized in traditional brick-and-mortar schools can find solace and regain self-esteem in an online setting. In physical settings, neurodiverse students are expected to advocate for themselves and their disabilities. This open vulnerability can lead to bullying or harassment from other students. In even rarer cases, a student's disability can even be the reason a teacher hesitates to provide additional assistance; however, in online school, "there's a level of privacy" that is maintained and protected, allowing the student to share as little as necessary or as much as they want to teachers and peers alike (Neal).

DeLaina Tonks, Royce Kimmons, and Stacie L. Mason suggest the same thing in their study conducted with neurodiverse students and parents. Of those who chose to enroll in an online school after attending a traditional brick-and-mortar school, 73% reported prior experiences as their reasons for switching, which included: bullying, teachers, academics, and disability/health. In their comments, some indicated dissatisfaction with previous special education departments in particular (Tonks et al. 178-179). In situations where neurodiverse students experienced bullying, many parents recounted that teachers and faculty were slow to resolve the situation. In even rarer cases, special education departments had an inadequate supply of resources necessary for students with disabilities to participate in class (Tonks et al. 181). Online school in many ways relieved these students of the stressors traditional school had encouraged, by providing the individualized support and additional resources required in order for them to succeed.

Incredibly, an unexpected amount of employers found that working remotely had a positive impact within their neurodiverse staff. Increased levels of productivity were particularly noticeable in employees who, in the office, found the social aspects in the workplace overwhelming. Alexandra Samuel, mother of an adult autistic son, says that “From the overload caused by ambient noise and fluorescent lights to the anxiety of constant conversation, there is a lot about conventional offices that can be challenging…” For those like Samuel’s son, who perform best when strictly working on assigned tasks, being interrupted on a daily basis in the office is more overwhelming than most people realize. As Samuel reports, Hunter Hansen, an autistic business analyst, recalls feelings of frustration when being broken out of his concentration by chatty co-workers: “I couldn’t triage the interruption if someone sneaked up on me. It really did affect my ability to lock in and focus” (Samuel). But Samuel believes that remote working “could transform the long-term opportunities for neurodiverse workers….” As remote working eliminates many stressors of work neurodiverse employees commonly experience, she believes that more employers will see these positive correlations between remote working and work performance, and that more jobs will open up for them in the future (Samuel).

Yet, others believe there are more serious repercussions remote working could have among neurodiverse employees. There are many who fear that businesses will soon regard remote working as the universal option for all neurodiverse employees, ultimately restricting them to their homes and making it difficult, if not impossible, for them to return to the physical workplace. To make this wide generalization that all neurodiverse employees want and can only work remotely could have distressing consequences, for it could essentially “reduce accommodations for those who would prefer to be at the office” (Samuel).

Other neurodiverse workers found remote working not an effective alternative. For people who enjoyed conversations with colleagues, remote working robbed them of the social interaction they craved. Nick Rankin, an autistic senior support engineer at SAP in Dublin, says that he does not have any issues in personal settings like others do (Ardill). For him, “missing the office outweighs many of the benefits of working from home” (Ardill). Rankin also admits that he prefers in-person communication over virtual correspondence because he has difficulty deciphering “easily in a Zoom meeting when to talk and when it’s my turn to speak” (Ardill). For one who already has trouble recognizing verbal and non-verbal cues during in-person conversations, the problem does not magically disappear when moved online. McGee concurred that her ADHD inhibits her from easily following the trains of thought throughout conversations. She insists, “I can be distracted by anything. I can be distracted by my own brain! I’m distracted by sound; I’m distracted by no sound!” (McGee). Both she and Rankin have difficulty recognizing social cues, which makes it hard for others like them to follow the flow of conversation, much less in a virtual setting. If McGee or Rankin were solely given the option to work remotely, their work performance would undoubtedly be worse compared to their ability to perform in-person.

Throughout the pandemic, online education and remote working were criticized and praised. For neurodiverse students and employees, the shift was found to be particularly frustrating. At the end of the day, though, there is no way to blame technology exclusively. The school system proved that it was unable to effectively deliver the demands parents expected them to; many districts, counties, and even entire states crumbled under the pressure to produce online learning programs for the 2020 fall semester and even afterwards. I agree with Neal in that the overall catastrophe that was online education during the Covid-19 pandemic can be attributed to the poor execution when it came to the constructing online learning platforms, lack of teacher preparation, and poor communication between parents and schools. With proper implementation and ample resources, I believe that online education makes for an excellent alternative for neurodiverse students who struggle to keep up mentally, emotionally, socially, or physically in traditional brick-and-mortar school. As far as remote working goes, employers have seen a great boost of productivity from their neurodiverse employees as a result of remote working. I believe it will continue to be a viable alternative for those who find themselves unable to perform to the best of their ability in the physical workplace; however, confining neurodiverse employees to the virtual workplace as an excuse to provide the resources necessary to make the physical workplace more accommodating should not become the standard. There are still those like Rankin and McGee who need in-person communication and socialization perform their jobs at utmost efficiency.

With online school and remote working as the only option for 2020 and much of 2021, our limits were tested. Re-discovering ourselves and how we operate might have been the greatest gift the Covid-19 pandemic could have given us. Many neurodiverse people found opportunities in different careers; others, like McGee, had the chance truly contemplate what they sought in life and if it was worth pursuing; and, of course, most everyone had the chance to figure out for themselves if they were suited for the work-at-home life.

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