Mercedes-Benz

Mercedes-Benz Research & Development North America Inc.

A CASE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

Neurodiversity is a specialized area most people in the workplace are not knowledgeable in. This is unfortunate not only for neurodiverse individuals, but companies' bottom lines as well: companies who champion employees with disabilities reported 28% higher profit margins and twice the net income of other companies.[1] Neurodiverse individuals provide unique strengths and thinking styles that companies benefit from, leading to greater innovation and better products.[2] From both ethical and business perspectives, there is great value in ensuring that neurodiverse people are supported and included in the workplace. HumanPoint recently worked with a neurodiverse client at Mercedes-Benz Research & Development North America Inc., whose success highlights how taking a customized, inclusive approach with neurodiverse employees can improve employee engagement, and team productivity, and overall quality of work.

[1] https://www.accenture.com/t20181029t185446z__w__/us-en/_acnmedia/pdf-89/accenture-disability-inclusion-research-report.pdf
[2] https://www-bizjournals-com.cdn.ampproject.org/c/s/www.bizjournals.com/cincinnati/news/2019/10/15/p-g-boosts-hiring-of-people-with-autism.amp.html

human point

THE SITUATION

A highly skilled software engineer at MBRDNA was struggling to meet expectations in his role. As a neurodiverse person on the autism spectrum, the expectations of his role were a poor fit for him, leading to frustrations for him and his team. He was hard-working and dedicated, but experienced difficulty communicating with his team and operating within the agile project management system in place. Additionally, this employee was monopolizing the senior engineers' time to ask questions, causing workflow problems for the team. The standard method for handling this situation would have involved putting him on a performance improvement plan (PIP), likely leading to termination. However, Paul*, a Senior People Business Partner at MBRDNA, and John, the employee's direct manager, wanted to find a win-win way for him to work in his areas of strength without singling him out from the team. How could this situation be resolved so that the employee would be able to meet performance expectations, find satisfaction in his role, and contribute his strengths to the team?

THE SOLUTION

Paul understood that the standard approach for working with an underperforming employee would likely not work well with this software engineer. Having been a long-time client of HumanPoint CEO Amy Hedin while at a previous company, he contacted Amy to see if she had any helpful resources for his struggling employee. Amy connected coach Lisa Hilbert to Paul and John and together, they strategized a plan. While Paul had explored his options, he explained the decision to work with HumanPoint, saying that "we met with other agencies doing similar work, some of which didn't provide what we were looking for, some of which we didn't feel a connection with. We knew right away HumanPoint was the best fit." Paul, and John moved forward with the approach Lisa suggested instead: customized employment.

Taking a customized employment approach meant tailoring the employee's workload to his strengths, helping others to see his value. Throughout the process, Lisa met with John and Paul to customize the employee's role and environment to fit him as well as the rest of his team, and to provide support and coaching to help them better understand leading a managing a neurodiverse engineer. In her work with this employee, Lisa focused on understanding and respecting individual and team values, optimizing talents, and utilizing universal design principles to reduce environmental barriers. John was enthusiastically on board with this approach, as he wanted his employee to feel successful and valuable, rather than singled out for not meeting expectations. Lisa then took the time to understand the employee's perspective, his values, and his work. Through his explanation, Lisa was able to see how this employee worked, what he prioritized, and what frustrated him about his position. From there, she worked with John and Paul to customize the employee's role and environment to fit him as well as the rest of his team.

*Names of MBRDNA employees have been changed

THE PROCESS

As an outside coach, Lisa was uniquely able to connect with the employee and learn about his perspective on his work. He expressed great admiration for John and mentioned that because of his appreciation for John as his manager, it was often easier to express ideas and frustrations about his work to Lisa. In addition, Lisa's expertise in neurodiversity helped her to understand the employee's perspective and identify how to best customize his role. As Lisa worked with him to identify his frustrations and needs at work, she identified roadblocks and areas of difficulty that uniquely affected his performance.

In order to create a better fit for this employee and the rest of the team, Lisa worked with Paul and John to take these frustrations and challenges into account. Lisa had learned from the employee that previous employers had utilized his specific skills but ended up pigeonholing him, with no opportunity for advancement. John realized that the employee wanted to remain part of the team and that the title of software engineer was important to him. Additionally, John and Paul both wanted to ensure that this employee would have opportunities for advancement as he moved forward with his career. John suggested to the employee that his title could be changed to reflect his new role, and he agreed. He now earns points for fixing bugs and ensuring the quality of code written and remains a part of the team while having his own work process. This shift allows him to utilize his strengths without limiting the scope of his career progress.

This customized employment approach worked well for the employee because it took his unique experience of the work environment into account. While John, Lisa, and Paul were able to rework his role to fit him well, they also took care to adapt the environment as well. For example, Lisa addressed the issue of respecting time in meetings by putting visual timers in the meeting space, available for anyone to use. This provided a way for the employee to manage his time well, without singling him out. Additionally, the chain of command concern was resolved when John provided the employee with clear information about who to go to with questions. Unlike a PIP, which would have focused on the employee's failings and likely increased his anxiety, this approach provided him with the expectations and environmental factors he needed to succeed in his work.

The outcomes of this customized employment approach for this employee have been incredible. John shared that this employee now "wears his progress like a badge." Under the previous system, his intelligence and ideas weren't able to shine; now, he feels that he is able to "freely create things that help the team," spending "so much less time stuck." In his new role, he has taken the initiative to develop a 5-step code review process for the whole team and is training new engineers. His work is rewarding, flexible, and meaningful. Paul described this employee's transformation at work, saying:

OUTCOMES

"I have met with him a few times throughout this process, and our last couple conversations have been extremely positive. He's happy, he's contributing, and he's extremely confident. He's finding success in a role that's a great fit. A couple months ago we were thinking we had to put him on a PIP, and now he's thriving... It's been great to be a part of that, to have such a positive impact on one of our people."

Ultimately, the productivity and quality of work for the entire team have benefitted from this process. John has seen a huge improvement in the employee's productivity, saying that the team is very happy with his work. Additionally, John noted that "the components previously had 20% test coverage and now have 80% coverage," resulting in a significant quality boost for the team's work. John and Paul's initial goal of a win-win, strengths-focused situation was achieved, showing the potential for improvement by working from a customized employment approach. By giving this employee the opportunity to use his strengths within a supportive environment, their code quality has improved, and the whole company is better because of it.