# The Art of Inclusion Diversity Council Australia logoTranscript

## Season 2 - Episode 4 – Thinking outside the box

## *Neurodiversity and autism at work*

### Yenn Purkis

We're all different. It doesn't mean one or other of us is better than anyone else, and so the idea of different not less, is absolutely at the core of the neuro-diversity movement, to say we are different, but we're equally valid. And that's really important, and as an autistic person, that's very important to me, that knowledge, that understanding, that I might be different to the rest of the world, but I'm not broken, I'm not wrong. There's nothing wrong with me, I'm not less, I'm just different, and that's a great thing.

### Andrew Maxwell

That's autism advocate, Yenn Purkis. She works in the Australian public service as a policy advisor, and is an accomplished author and speaker. In this episode, she shares her experience of being an employee with autism, and talks about neuro-diversity in the context of the workplace. Her experience and expertise will challenge the myths that surround autism and neuro-diversity, and you may just start to think differently about this subject.

I'm Andrew Maxwell, and I would like to acknowledge, and pay my respects to the traditional custodians of this land. To the elders, past, present, and emerging, on whose country this recording is taking place. This is the Art of Inclusion, a podcast from Diversity Council Australia, or DCA. In our second series we peer into the lives of fascinating people, whose individual stories create the tapestry of diversity that make up Australia, and its workplaces. Welcome to this episode on neuro-diversity, where we are focusing on autism, and the reality that we're all neurologically diverse, and there is no normal.

One important note in this episode in order not to define or impose, we're using the person diagnosis approach, that is, saying, "A person with autism," even though many people including Yen herself, use the diagnosis person approach saying, "Autistic person." Yenn explains her preference.

### Yenn Purkis

I like to be referred to as an autistic person, and that is using identity first language, which is the idea that autism is an integral part of who I am, rather than being an add on. There is a really positive element to that label, which is the identity that can come with it. The sense of feeling part of your autistic peer group. So the label has that element, that's actually very positive, and empowering element of identity and pride. But it's a very complex area, because in my mind, in a perfect world it wouldn't be a medical diagnosis. It would just be a, "Oh, actually you've got this difference, so you need to do these things in order to live life well." But as we are at the moment, we do live in a medical model of disability largely, and so that label is used as a medical label.

### Andrew Maxwell

Another label which has grown in use and popularity is neuro-diversity.

### Yenn Purkis

Some people who fall under categories such as autism, or ADHD, or dyslexia, are what is known as neuro-divergent, and neuro-diversity is about understanding that, and respecting those differences.

### Andrew Maxwell

A key component of the neuro-diversity movement is that everybody's brains are wired differently, so there is no real normal. That is, we're all neurologically different.

### Yenn Purkis

It actually is a social or political movement of talking about different neurology, and talking about the idea that neuro-diverse people are different, not less. So it's not a case of trying to fix us. It's a case of using our unique skills and abilities in order to have us participating in the world, and fulfilling our potential, and having a meaningful and purposeful life, I suppose, which is possible for all of us.

### Andrew Maxwell

Yen has been successful in building a meaningful life and career, but it hasn't been without challenges. Including the things many of us see as part and parcel of the everyday workplace. There's open plan offices.

### Yenn Purkis

And most of the time I'm listening to music in my headphones, because if I don't, everyone's conversations just distract me, and people have conversations everywhere.

### Andrew Maxwell

Bright lights.

### Yenn Purkis

And I don't know why we persist with the down lights, and the fluorescent lights, when they are just a nightmare. A lot autistic people, or people with sensory processing disorder generally, can hear those lights buzzing, it's like buzz, all the time. It's very hard to concentrate when that's happening. And I think sensory accessibility is actually as important as physical accessibility for people that need that as a consideration, because it does preclude people from doing things.

### Andrew Maxwell

And then there's the biggest challenge of all: other people's perceptions.

### Yenn Purkis

Well one of the things that's a really, really big issue is a lack of confidence in an autistic person's capabilities. So that assumption of incompetence, they won't be able to do this. And that's rarely based in reality, and it's rarely true. And I think the lack of giving anyone a go is really common.

I've had a few managers who've had issues, and what I find is, if a manager is going to have an issue with me, there's not much I can do about it. But some managers see me, and they don't get me at all, and they're never quite sure what to do with me and that's resulted in some really unpleasant work situations. And these people don't have to be bullies or micromanagers. It's just they don't get my working style, and they think I'm totally incompetent. And of course, when someone's treating you that way, with that attitude, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and you start getting really under confident, and not performing as highly as you would. And I think that is an issue for autistic staff members more generally, is that those assumptions around someone's competence can really dictate not only that person's career path, but also how that person sees themselves.

### Andrew Maxwell

This prejudice of low expectations can have a devastating impact on many people who are deemed to exist beyond the margins of the so-called norm. And to understand where this neuro-divergent prejudice comes from, we've enlisted the help of Dr Darren Hedley. He's a researcher who heads up the La Trobe University's work on autism in the workplace.

### Dr Darren Hedley

It's a lot about knowledge, and fear about the diagnosis. I mean it's the stigma, it's the knowledge. It's not really knowing, well maybe I want to employ someone with autism, but I don't have the resources. I've never done this before. I don't know what steps to take. I don't have the capacity to support them. Right? So we need to break down some of those myths. We need to understand.

### Andrew Maxwell

Since 2013, autism and Asperger's have come under the umbrella diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder, or ASD. Acknowledging this spectrum, or range within this diagnosis, and not stereotyping will help break down barriers.

### Dr Darren Hedley

We get our knowledge about people with different diagnoses from media, from television, you know, not everyone with autism is a rain man, or maybe we hear a lot about people with very high support needs who aren't going to be well suited within an organisation. So it really depends on the knowledge and exposure we have to different conditions. And I think the more knowledge and the more exposure we have, the stigma around that condition, or disability decreases.

### Andrew Maxwell

Creating inclusive workplaces for people who are neuro-divergent needn't be a difficult or prohibitive prospect.

### Dr Darren Hedley

It's going to depend on the individual. I mean, if we consider anxiety disorder, for example, as being an example of someone who needs accommodations within the workplace to be effective and efficient. Being sort of observed, or in a noisy place, or being stuck in the middle of people, means that it's going to exasperate that anxiety. People are going to be more worried about that, and unable to work effectively.

If we can put that person in a place within the workplace where it's quiet, where they're not surrounded by people, they can be much more effective, and they're not working at this sort of heightened stress level. Same with people with autism where sensory sensitivities may be an issue. Hence trying to modulate the noise, or the lighting might be important. Not for everyone, but certainly a lot of individuals do report issues with flickering lights for example, or noise, and that just comes with the diagnosis. It's part of the way that their brain manages sensory input. And also there's a lot of co-occurring conditions within individuals, so someone with autism, there's a good chance that they might also have anxiety or depression. So these are things that need to be considered in managing the workplace, and make it more accessible for everyone.

### Andrew Maxwell

Flexibility is also key.

### Dr Darren Hedley

Someone may be able to work two days a week, and then they need a day off just to recover. They might be able to do five hours a day, rather than seven and a half or eight hours a day. So flexibility I think is really key. So if more organisations can be flexible, and try and support the individual, then I think that's a big step forward into creating a more accommodating workplace. And a lot of these things are, they're really not difficult. They're often small barriers that can be overcome fairly easily. They're usually not massive accommodations that are required.

### Andrew Maxwell

The benefits that come with these small accommodations can be great. They make a real difference, not just to the individual concerned, but their team. And by extension the organisation they are working for.

### Dr Darren Hedley

So there is that idea that potentially people who are on the sort of fringes of society, which are the people that we're talking about, have different ways of looking at things. And that different way of thinking about things, or looking at things is valuable, and it's valuable to modern organisations.

### Andrew Maxwell

Our story teller Yenn, has firsthand insight into the value people with autism can bring to the workplace.

### Yenn Purkis

There is no one set of autistic skills that we all share, but there's a number of skills that most of us, or lots of us have. So things like attention to detail, we tend to be scrupulously honest, and it's not a choice. This is just how we're wired. We are very honest people. We tend to have a great ability for pattern thinking. So if you're working in a knowledge work sort of environment, then that pattern thinking is really important. We tend to be actually very kind and thoughtful of other employees, and so if someone like a new staff member or something comes, we can be very good as a buddy, we can be very helpful, and very thoughtful. We tend to be very loyal, and if you offer us a job, especially for me, I had never worked in a professional job in my life, so when I joined the public service, I just thought it was the best thing ever, and I still do 12 years later. So that loyalty to the employer is really high. That's a great thing.

### Andrew Maxwell

With so many strengths and skills, it could be argued that neuro-diversity should be considered as another dimension of diversity, rather than a form of disability. Here's Darren Hedley on getting the balance between support and talent recognition right.

### Dr Darren Hedley

The neuro-diversity movement has tended to focus on the strengths and contribution, whereas in the disability field we've always tended to focus on the weaknesses, the supports that are needed. There needs to be balance, right? There needs to be balance of the two. There are strengths, but at the same time there are support needs, and for people to be successful within the workplace, they certainly need those supports in place. However, at the same time we also need to acknowledge the contribution that individual can make, and I think that's the strength in the neuro-diversity movement, is that it is an acknowledgement of the contribution and the strengths of the individual.

### Andrew Maxwell

Neuro-diverse employees are a key part of any thriving, diverse workforce. But they face many barriers which hurts their ambitions, and deprives organisations of the talents and skills they bring. Even though we're all neurologically different in some way, we haven't been very creative when putting our brains to the issue. So it's time we all think differently, for better outcomes.

### Yenn Purkis

I'm a great employee, and that's often the case that autistic employees might have some additional issues about joining the workforce, or understanding what's expected of us in the workplace, but if we get those things right, we can be the most engaged, and high performing, and loyal employees you could ever imagine.

### Andrew Maxwell

The Art of Inclusion is a podcast from Diversity Council Australia, Andrea Maltman Rivera, and Sam Loy are the producers, and Lisa Annese is the executive producer. This episode has had contributions from Tracy Hocking. You can keep the conversation going by reaching out on our Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter pages. If you've liked what you heard, check out the first season of the Art of Inclusion, either from the DCA website, dca.org.au, or from your favourite podcast player. On our website you can access related DCA research and training, including our unconscious bias materials, the Future-Flex report on mainstreaming flexibility, and the Inclusion@Work Index. I'm Andrew Maxwell. Thanks for listening.