**Championing Autism and Neurodiversity at EY**

**Transcript**

Speaker 1 Laura Grant – DE&I Lead, Oceania, at EY

Speaker 2 Zoe Field – Workplace Adjustment Lead at EY

**Laura:**

I think the real catalyst for us in the neurodiversity space at EY Oceania has been the program that we ran in 2021, the Switched On Autism Employment Program, which was a DSS-funded research initiative run by the University of Sydney's Brain and Mind Center to look at the impact of supported workplace programs on employment outcomes for autistic adults.

So, through that program and the data that we collected, and the insights, we started to really see gaps that were emerging in our organisation, that perhaps we hadn't been so keenly aware of, that can present barriers to neurodivergent people in the workplace.

And from that time onwards, we have been doing a lot of work in the neurodiversity space.

One area that we felt we needed to address more was creating psychological safety.

Not just for autistic people at EY. But also for the leaders of autistic people who perhaps don't feel safe or empowered to have conversations about autism or their autistic employees or team members.

So that's where the Autism Champion initiative was born.

**Zoe:**

So, as Laura said, helping our leaders to just be more comfortable to reach out to, we just realised how much people *do* want to learn, but they needed to have those psychologically safe spaces to be able to go.

People are sometimes uncomfortable, aren't they? They're uncomfortable to say, ‘I don't know how to respond to this.’ Champions did provide that space.

**Laura:**

I also think that the role of creating safe spaces and creating autism acceptance shouldn't just fall to DE&I practitioners or your employee network, representatives and leaders.

I think it's important to bring others along on the journey with you. So, Zoe and I had the privilege of selecting other people to join us as Autism workplace Champions.

And it's great to be able to share this with other people in the organisation outside of our immediate team who are passionate about fostering that psychological safety and those safe spaces as well.

**Zoe:**

So ... we initially had a core project team that we were working with to design, identify, and think, what does the role look like, where would it sit, and how would we communicate it and offer it to people?

And we had a number of people from throughout the business, of varying ranks, locations

and service lines, reaching out saying that they would be really interested to take part.

And we sat down, didn't we, Laura? With individuals and had a chat through to really understand what their motivation was for wanting to take the role on.

We then partnered with an external organ organisation to co-design a three-part workshop to really tailor it around what we felt we needed for our people at what level and in what order. And then we designed the three-part workshop for the Autism Workplace Champions.

And in addition to that, the Champions were required to complete some other existing internal EY learning, such as inclusive leadership and other neurodiversity training that we have held throughout the business over the last year or two.

**Laura:**

Beyond that, we have set up a closed group on Teams, which is the platform that we collaborate on at EY.

We post regularly in there with resources and knowledge shares and updates and things like that. We also create different resources and things that they can leverage so that they can be empowered to actually talk about autism, you know, in a team call or at an event or something like that without always having to rely on myself and Zoe to be everywhere all at once to be the people having the conversations.

I think an interesting challenge has been that the tension of this initiative was around fostering greater psychological safety for autistic individuals and their leaders and colleagues.

Yet what we've seen is that there needs to be enough trust and psychological safety there for people to feel that they want to have a conversation with one of the Autism Workplace Champions.

An autistic person may feel sceptical about why they should talk to this person and confide in this person and think ‘What can they really offer for us?’

I suppose this connects back to the broader work that we're doing around neurodiversity.

We've recently launched the firm's first neurodiversity strategy within our Oceania region, and this really sets out a roadmap of activity and focus areas for us over the next couple of years, which will be about us walking the talk and putting the work in.

But not only will autistic and other neurodivergent people therefore experience the changes and the shifts that will come, but they can see what is going into that and hopefully be feeling greater levels of inclusion and belonging and experiencing that they are part of accessible, inclusive, safe workplaces.

Again, we hope that autistic and other neurodivergent people experience that their leaders and their colleagues operate and communicate in more neuro inclusive ways which will help them to feel greater psychological safety in the workplace. And again, for them to see that EY is really committed to the work that we're doing and committed to our progress and making EY a more inclusive, accessible workplace for neurodivergent people.

So ... all this is not the kind of change that comes quickly or overnight. As with any underrepresented or marginalised community in a workplace, you centre the right voices, and you have to ensure that you have co-design in what you're doing, and you have to walk the talk.

And so for us ... we're probably what, two and-a-half, three years ... realistically into our journey.

**Zoe:**

As an Autism Workplace Champion and as a Workplace Adjustment Case Manager, I've seen an increase in disclosures within the business.

I think ... I’m hearing an increase in people feeling psychologically safe to disclose. And I’m seeing our internal Community Connect Groups growing a lot more.

We have a closed neurodiverse Community Connect Group that's confidential, closed, and we have over ... I'm thinking, 150 members probably, is that right, Laura?

And the conversations ... there's a lot of chat on them, people reaching out, making connections, reaching out for hints and tips in the workplace, and I feel as though there's been a change. A lot more openness around conversations.

And there are the leaders reaching out ... and obviously they're still learning, but they’re reaching out for advice and really wanting to make a difference. And really wanting to ensure that their team members are getting equitable opportunities and equitable experiences.

So yeah, that's what I've observed in the roles.

**Laura:**

We've just started collecting some data, as well, around looking at the confidence and comfort to team and lead in a neuro inclusive way with neurodivergent colleagues.

We're still very early in that kind of data collection stage, but we certainly are seeing that confidence is increasing with time the more that we invest in these different initiatives that we're running.

And I think even just with the Autism Workplace Champions themselves, you know, anecdotally, they've shared that the opportunity to be part of this has really helped them to continue to learn and build a deeper understanding, and be able to take that out to their parts of the EY business, and their departments and teams, and so on.

We know that's been a really rewarding experience for them, as well. And for those Autism Workplace Champions who are autistic themselves, to be part of this, as an autistic individual, I think has had great impact on them in terms of them feeling able to really contribute to this initiative, and to EYs progress in a really tangible way.