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Harnessing Neurodiverse Talent by Professor Amanda Kirby

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Professor Amanda Kirby is a GP with a widely recognised reputation in neurodiversity, specifically neurodiverse talent in the workplace. She has written 10 books and over 100 research papers in the field, leading clinical and research experience as well as being the founder of Do-It Solutions. Professor Kirby is also an emeritus professor at the University of South Wales and an honorary professor at Cardiff University.

Amanda Kirby's session began by defining the important terms such as neurodiverse, neurodivergent and neurotypical, reminding the audience that everyone is neuro (brain)-diverse (different). Neurodiversity is a social construct, people create systems that fit them and attract them. If an individual does not 'fit in' the construct, they are not able to showcase their talent. In Universities for example, exams assess neat handwriting and speed, therefore excluding people who do not 'fit' that standard. To define neurodiversity, Professor Kirby explains that 'We all think, move, act, process information and communicate differently'. Associated to this concept are neurotypical individuals, who do things to make them fit in.

After defining the important terms, Amanda Kirby explains that although we are all neurodiverse, some have developmental conditions that they were born with such as autism or dyslexia. This is the case for 15-20% of the population. Since identifying the existence of these developmental conditions, there has been a particular focus on a limited number of them, in particular dyslexia. This has been an issue as schools and Universities have been focusing on this particular condition, omitting others such as dyspraxia and dyscalculia. Professor Kirby also highlighted the fact that individuals can have more than one condition, and this is often the case.

The presentation then went on to discuss issues with diagnosing these conditions. The system is designed so that you have to have significant enough symptoms in a singular area in order to be diagnosed. This is an issue as many individuals have different types of symptoms associated with different conditions. In addition to this, support is only given to individuals with a diagnosis. Professor Kirby comments that the model is deficient as it stills sees these conditions as a disorder rather than a strength and many people's opinions on neurodivergence are negative. This pushes individuals who have developmental conditions to not disclose them or disclose them later and when they do share this information, it often doesn't go well, and they do not progress further. A focus is made on women, who are often misdiagnosed or diagnosed later. Research on neurodivergent women has only started in the last 10 years, which has led to limited knowledge in this field. Because women are often not diagnosed or misdiagnosed, they mask their condition(s) to fit in, leading to anxiety, eating disorders and mental health issues amongst others. Many women may not be confident enough to ask for support, which should be recognised, particularly in universities.

In Universities, it is important to acknowledge that every student has a different profile and will need different types of support. Professor Kirby presented a case study whereby a computer screening was carried out before students started to identify their strengths and weaknesses, not with the aim of diagnosing them but to better support them. For engineering students, many will complete work placements which will lead them to move around the country, requiring different types of support. In order to support students, professors need to look into the way they teach as well as assess. Amanda Kirby explains that performance is equal to potential minus interference. Students may deal with several challenges at universities including dealing with complex bureaucratic processes, procrastinating, meeting deadlines, having to read high levels of material, communicating ideas verbally and/or in writing and dealing with emotions amongst others. It is important to flip the narrative and start seeing skills instead of shortcomings. For example, technical strengths (such as hyper-focus, multitasking, logical thinking, problem identification, problem solving, etc.), creativity, interpersonal skills, resilience, teamworking, independent working and management skills. In order to make sure we attract neurodivergent individuals we need to make sure we have equitable approaches. For Universities, it is important to consider blind spots and look at disclosure rates. Different disclosure rates highlight places were people feel safe to disclose their condition(s).

Finally, Professor Kirby encouraged the audience to question what their neurodivergent bias was. Often, we measure it on a superficial level such as fidgeting or avoiding eye contact. It is also important to look at the employment life cycle: how many neurodivergent people are progressing? How many are being lost?