

Success Enablers that Empower Neurodivergent Technology Professionals (SEEN Tech Professionals)

Hala Annabi, PhD, University of Washington, Information School, hpannabi@uw.edu

Elizabeth Follmer, PhD, University of Washington Bothell, School of Business, follmer@uw.edu

Jennifer Mankoff, PhD, University of Washington, Computer Science & Engineering, jmankoff@uw.edu

Scott Bellman, MA, University of Washington, DO-IT Center, swb3@uw.edu

Abstract

SEEN Tech Professionals is a three-year research project to improve our understanding of success enablers for neurodivergent technology professionals and build the capacity of technology organizations to facilitate their use. The project's goals are to 1) empower neurodivergent professionals to determine, identify, and use what they deem as appropriate success enablers based on their intersecting identities and 2) build the capacity of organizations to systemize and normalize the use of success enablers more readily. Our project advances our theoretical understanding of how neurodivergent technology professionals leverage various success enablers to address barriers they face and the role organizational interventions (e.g., Neurodiversity Hiring Initiatives) and managers play in facilitating the use and normalization of success enablers. We propose to do so in partnership with neurodivergent advocates and other key stakeholders, including employers and service providers.

Background

The inclusion of many aspiring neurodivergent technology professionals remains abysmal due to systemic barriers in the technology workplace. While the scientific and practitioner communities have made some notable progress in understanding barriers facing neurodivergent people, these efforts have not gone far enough to provide solutions to enable the success and advancement of neurodivergent employees. Very few studies investigate specific success enablers grounded in a strength orientation towards disability and considerate of the unique needs, interests, and strengths of neurodivergent individuals in the context of their work and organizational settings. While there has been notably more research conducted to explore neurodiversity employment in recent years, these studies remain few and small in scope (Bruyère & Colella, 2022). Most studies focus predominantly on the opportunities and barriers employees experience (e.g., Morris et al., 2015; Hedley et al., 2018; Bury et al. 2022), the attitudes, expectations, perceptions, biases coworkers and managers may hold (e.g., Morris, et al.2015; Spoor et al., 2022), and the organizational factors that enable or limit employment of neurodivergent people (Austin & Pisano, 2017). There are very few studies that investigate specific success enablers grounded in a strength orientation and considerate of the unique needs and strengths of the individual in the context of their work and organizational setting. Neurodivergent employees' challenges are heterogeneous and, therefore, require a variety of organizational solutions (Annabi & Locke, 2019; Ezerins et al., 2024). Success enablers are not limited to accommodations as traditionally specified by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and Title I of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Accommodations historically are limited in scope and targeting support for the individual. Success enablers are a broader set of practices and work designs that include accommodations but are not limited to them. Success enablers include both *support* and, more importantly, *changes to the workplace environment*, such as training managers and coworkers in neuroinclusive practices. For neurodiversity hiring programs and the employment of neurodivergent people to continue to grow, we must better understand how to identify and deploy success enablers that ensure each neurodivergent employee's equitable inclusion, advancement, and long-term success in the workplace.

We ground our work in Annabi and Locke's (2019) Organizational Interventions Mitigating Individual Barriers Framework (OIMIB), which provides a novel and critical lens to guide the investigation of neurodiversity employment (Moeller & Annabi, 2023; Krzeminska et al., 2019). OIMIB (illustrated in Figure 1) includes five components to demarcate individual-, intervention-, and organizational-level

constructs that influence neurodivergent individuals' experiences in the workplace. The interplay between these constructs explains the varied ways in which neurodivergent employees experience barriers in the workplace and maximize opportunities to secure and persist in employment. This framework provides a synthesis of the neurodiversity literature detailed in Annabi's work (Annabi & Locke, 2019; Annabi, 2018; Moeller & Annabi, 2023).

Organizational level characteristics, such as executive support, organization champions, culture of inclusion, etc., shape the Barriers and Opportunities that neurodivergent employees face and determine the accessibility and normalization of Neurodiversity Interventions designed to mitigate them, such as employee resource groups (ERG), success enablers, manager training, and mentoring programs. At the individual level, OIMIB posits that neurodivergent individuals experience workplace barriers and opportunities differently based on Individual Differences that include 1) individual identity (e.g., personal demographics and career items); 2) individual influences (e.g., personal characteristics, deep interest, nature of diagnosis event, past experience of marginalization, mentors); and 3) environmental influences (e.g., cultural, economic, ableist and anti-ableist policy, and infrastructure influences). Grounded in the Individual Differences Theory of Gender and Information Technology (IDTGIT) (Trauth & Connolly, 2021; Trauth & Quesenberry, 2009) and the neurodiversity literature, this construct depicts the role of intersectionality in neurodivergent identity and experiences. These individual differences also influence how and whether an individual chooses to utilize any neurodiversity intervention and whether they deploy their own Individual Coping Methods to mitigate their experience of barriers and maximize opportunities in the workplace (Siebers, 2019; Moeller & Annabi, 2023; Annabi, 2023). Coping methods range from seeking informal mentors and ignoring barriers to more severe responses, such as masking, changing personal characteristics, or leaving their jobs. We know little about the coping methods that neurodivergent professionals use to mitigate barriers in the workplace. Our research will identify and systemize coping methods that are success enablers contributing to an individual's well-being rather than those that lead to unhealthy outcomes, such as masking.

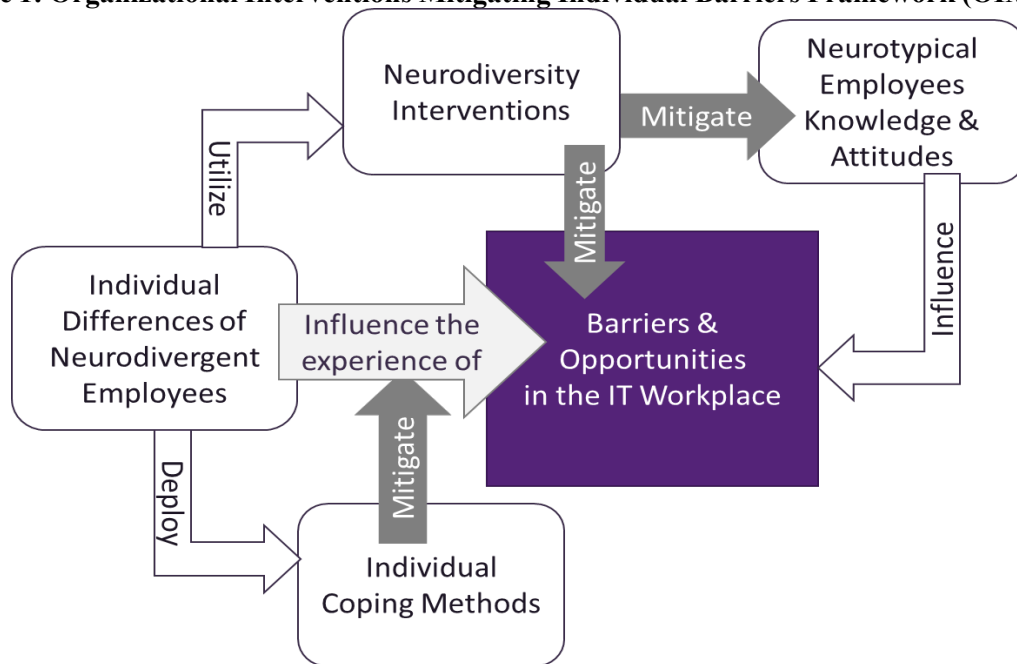
Research Design and Questions

Drawing on OIMIB's conceptualization of the experiences of neurodivergent people in the workplace, success enablers can be specific coping methods that individuals use based on their knowledge and experience in the world, as well as methods and practices that organizations provide. **Our overarching research question is: What are the key workplace success enablers for neurodivergent technology professionals?** In particular:

1. What are the most common success enablers neurodivergent individuals identify as critical in the workplace?
2. What role do managers play in identifying, normalizing, and systemizing success enablers to support their ND employees?
3. What are the organizational characteristics that support or limit the identification, implementation, and systemization of success enablers?

Our project will be carried out in three phases over three years. In **Phase 1, we identify success enablers** in the workplace using OIMIB by conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups with a broadly-recruited, criteria-based sample. Findings from Phase 1 will inform **Phase 2 when we verify success enablers** by conducting nationwide surveys of neurodivergent advocates, managers, employers, and providers. Informed by the first two phases, in **Phase 3, we will identify and co-design interventions and facilitators** that make success enablers more easily discoverable, usable, and normalized to support neurodivergent professionals and their managers. We will conduct participatory design sessions in three workshops with key stakeholders to create high-impact interventions organized in a comprehensive *Neuroinclusive Success Enablers Toolkit* designed to empower neurodivergent employees and build the capacity of their managers, HR professionals, and providers to leverage and normalize success enablers.

Figure 1: Organizational Interventions Mitigating Individual Barriers Framework (OIMIB)



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