Thinking outside the box: the benefits of hiring a person with a mental disability.
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In this rapidly changing world, it is not only medicine, technology and science that improves the lives of people. What is equally life-changing is that our society is opening up to a more inclusive approach to diversity. Diversity knows many different forms: from ethnic, gender, religious and class diversity to disability. In this article, I look into diversity at work. I explain the importance and benefits of including people with disabilities in regular jobs, more specifically the advantages of including a person with Down Syndrome in a team, based on my own experience working with a colleague that has Down Syndrome.

Before exploring diversity at work by looking into mental disability, I want to touch upon workplace diversity in a wider sense: “Workplace diversity is understanding, accepting, and valuing differences between people” (Bremer 2020). A lot of attention is paid to the visible differences between people: age, ethnicity, gender, etc. But often forgotten, are the invisible differences between people; a mental disability can be one of those. Other examples are, for instance, values and beliefs, family status and life experiences. These aspects shape a person just as much as the visible differences that can be observed between people.

Diversity Atlas is a tool developed by Cultural Infusion that measures diversity in organizations and businesses. Based on key parameters (ethnicity, country of birth, language and worldview/religion), Diversity Atlas has created an index to measure diversity. Measuring diversity in an organization is useful for various reasons; by knowing how diverse a team is, the right team building activities can be organized. Policies can be better adjusted to individual needs of employees such as flexible holidays for instance. Having a diversity index can offer a comparison of diversity over different departments, companies and shows the development throughout the years. Another benefit in knowing diversity in your company is found in what Martin Plowman of Cultural Infusion calls ‘mutuality’; the match between the diversity seen in the organization and the community. This match is important for a number of reasons: to create responsive products/services/laws, but also to send the right signal to society that people in minority groups can also make it.
Our bodies are physically designed to have an internal thermometer; whenever we cool down too much, we automatically start to shiver and when we overheat, we start to sweat. Unfortunately, our minds lack such a thermometer; we often overheat without noticing it and keep working, sometimes even resulting in burn-outs. Not only on a personal level is this happening to us; groups often experience the same phenomenon; unnoticed tension can rise in households, in groups of friends and in offices.

During my thesis research, I worked with KMZERO, an open innovation hub based in Valencia, to research their company culture. One of the team members, Salva, was born with Down Syndrome. He works as an assistant in the company and is responsible for many tasks such as preparing the meeting room, gardening, making coffee, helping with packaging and so on. In a conversation, one of the team members told me about an experience working with Salva.

She recalled a moment in the office that was during a stressful period of time. Tension in the office was slowly rising and no one in the team noticed it until Salva mentioned it. He was not shy to express himself and communicated to the team that the tension was affecting him. Salva’s reaction helped the colleagues to get in touch with themselves again. Besides bringing good vibes to the workplace and helping the work/fun balance to remain healthy, there are many other advantages of including a person with Down Syndrome in a team. People with Down Syndrome are known for being punctual and motivated and excel in thinking outside of the box. The latter is especially important in today’s rapidly changing world where creativity is highly valued.

Not only is having a colleague with a mental disability such as Down Syndrome beneficial on an organizational, or meso level; it also improves the quality of life on the personal, or micro level. Having a job can change someone’s life; the feeling of independence helps people to realize that they are a productive member of society. On the societal or macro level, we clearly see the benefits as well. We are shifting from the ‘old’ way of perceiving and treating people with mental disabilities as an abnormality that is marginalized, towards an inclusive approach where people with mental disabilities are perceived and treated as valuable members of our society.

Unfortunately, many mental healthcare professionals solely focus on the symptoms and fail to acknowledge the importance of work when treating a person with a mental disability (Evans and Repper 2000). The shift I touched upon in the previous paragraph is bringing change to this ‘symptom approach’ of mental healthcare professionals. Stein and Santos (1998) see this shift manifesting in the fact that people with mental disabilities are more often placed in regular jobs and supported on the work floor. The social disability and access model (Perkins and Repper 1996) moves away from the traditional perspective where people are ‘changed’ in order to fit the workplace. The model rather adapts the workplace to the needs and abilities of the person. Often these changes can be made through small adjustments such as informing the team and welcoming the right guidance to support the employee with a mental disability.
The right guidance is important for every employee. This guidance is often offered by the HR department of a company, but when considering hiring an employee with a mental disability, extra guidance can be useful in many cases. Asindown is a Valencian non-profit organization that offers help to people (and families of people) with mental disabilities in all phases of life. Their main goal is to work towards an inclusive society in which every member feels comfortable and valuable. The guidance starts at a young age with early attention therapy sessions. In the classrooms of Asindown, the multidisciplinary team supports children of all ages after school. In this way, many children with mental disabilities are able to join general education. After graduating from school, special projects are offered in order to prepare qualified candidates for entering the job market. Because of the personal approach of the team, the children are able to develop the talents and skills that are useful for the job that suits them the best. Asindown also has a department that serves as a mediator between companies and job candidates. The team knows the candidates very well, and by talking and visiting prospect companies, an ideal match can be made. At the beginning of the employment, Asindown offers close guidance which is slowly scaled down to monthly meetings. This facilitates the employee to work independently, surrounded by a support network that can always be consulted.

With this article, I hope to encourage employers to consider thinking outside the box in order to improve their working environments. People with a mental disability can be incredibly valuable on the work floor in many different ways; from maintaining a healthy work/fun balance to executing tasks in a rigorous way. Organizations such as Asindown demonstrate that having a mental disability does not necessarily make someone disabled. The body could be labelled as handicapped by the world, and the person can perceive him/herself as hardly disabled. In other words: People with disabilities themselves are not abnormal, it is the world that labels them this way. For this reason, it is important to have an inclusive diversity policy in companies. By hiring a person with a disability, an impact is made on a micro, meso and
macro level. Because of organizations such as Asindown many young people with mental disabilities can join general education, graduates can find a job, and adults can live independently. All they need is a chance and the right guidance.

