



Mansfield Disability Inclusion Webinar Recap

April 3, 2025

Topic: *Neurodiversity Awareness*

Disclosure and Self-Identification in the Workplace

- **Diversity Lab:** How our minds differ is a significant factor in many aspects of professional life. When we don't use this lens, we overlook critical elements about our teams, communications, relationships, conflicts, and our overall impact.
- **Panelist:** As a partner who identifies as Hispanic and was diagnosed with ADHD three years ago, I approach disclosure carefully despite being in a protected position. At my firm, we currently have only two people who openly identify as neurodivergent, which reflects the broader hesitation in the legal profession. I advise careful consideration before disclosure, as I've witnessed colleagues express concern about stigma and assumptions about intelligence. Having spent 18 years in professional settings before my diagnosis, I developed strong masking skills that helped me navigate, but took a significant toll on my mental health. My approach to disclosure was influenced by my experience identifying as Latino — another aspect of my identity that isn't immediately visible but that I've chosen to be forward about as part of my commitment to authenticity.
- **Panelist:** In my experience as a labor and employment associate with ADHD and dyslexia diagnoses since childhood, I chose to disclose my dyslexia shortly after joining my firm because it directly impacts my work product, particularly in catching typos in briefs. I implemented a practical accommodation strategy by adding dedicated proofreading time to my workflow and explaining to colleagues that, despite my diligence, there are certain errors I simply cannot catch. I sought additional support through proofreaders and was met with understanding from the firm, which created a supportive environment that later made me comfortable discussing my ADHD. Being open about my neurodivergence has encouraged others to come forward about their own experiences, creating a ripple effect of disclosure that helps more people access the support they need.
- **Panelist:** As a litigation attorney with 15 years of experience who is both autistic and has ADHD, I made the significant decision to disclose my neurodivergence publicly through a "LinkedIn party" because I wanted to provide context for how I've interacted with colleagues throughout my career. While I felt somewhat sad about needing to disclose this aspect of myself, I recognized it as a personal choice that could help others understand me better. My disclosure came after experiencing professional exclusion, including not being invited to social gatherings with colleagues. This experience highlights the social challenges that can accompany neurodivergence in professional settings and the importance of creating inclusive environments where differences in social interaction styles are

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understood and accommodated.

Professional Development and Workplace Challenges

- **Panelist:** I've found that traditional time management resources often fail to address the specific challenges neurodivergent attorneys face. As someone with ADHD and dyslexia, I struggle significantly with time entry — lacking motivation to complete it, having difficulty remembering what I worked on, and feeling reluctant to reveal how long tasks took me. The most effective support has come not from formal resources but from peer networks where colleagues share practical strategies and approaches for navigating difficult conversations with other attorneys. This highlights the need for more targeted professional development resources that address the specific executive functioning challenges that many neurodivergent attorneys face, particularly around time management, task initiation, and memory.
- **Panelist:** My experience with professional development as someone with ADHD has been complicated by assumptions about my work ethic and capabilities. Before my diagnosis, I was often labeled as lazy or a procrastinator despite pushing myself extremely hard, which eventually led to significant mental health issues. I would frequently spend hours researching a topic, but struggle to identify the most important information, making my work process appear inefficient. For networking at conferences, I've developed specific strategies that work with my neurodivergent traits rather than against them — I find it much more effective to attend with someone I know or to connect deeply with one person rather than attempting to network broadly. This approach allows me to leverage my ability to form deep connections while accommodating my discomfort with small talk and social navigation. I've found that being honest about my working style and focusing on what I can uniquely contribute is ultimately more successful than trying to conform to neurotypical expectations.
- **Panelist:** As an autistic attorney who also has ADHD, I've observed that our brains truly function differently, yet there's a significant lack of resources, understanding, and compassion toward neurodiversity in the U.S. legal profession. I've found that the most effective approach is to assume everyone has an unseen disability and treat them accordingly with kindness and patience. This perspective shift creates a more supportive environment for everyone. As a neurodivergent professional, you may be constantly learning through mistakes, which can create hypersensitivity to how others perceive you. This constant vigilance and fear of social missteps creates significant additional cognitive load that neurotypical colleagues don't experience, making everyday workplace interactions more taxing and stressful.
- **Diversity Lab:** The challenge of "not being able to make yourself do something" despite understanding its importance creates deep shame when others perceive it as simple laziness. This executive dysfunction can be difficult to explain to

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others who might say, "This is not that deep; I do it quickly." We need to foster curiosity rather than judgment when these situations arise. Time perception differences also create challenges — what feels like a day or two to someone with ADHD might actually be weeks, leading to missed deadlines despite best intentions. I implement various strategies to better understand and manage time, but there remains a fundamental difference in how my brain works.

Diagnosis and Self-Understanding

- **Panelist:** In my experience, ADHD often functions as a foundational disorder where symptoms like depression are secondary manifestations rather than separate conditions. This understanding has been crucial for effective treatment — addressing only the depression without tackling the underlying ADHD meant missing critical steps in my wellness journey. I've implemented specific morning routines that ensure sufficient cognitive energy when I arrive at work, significantly improving my performance and well-being. For those considering whether to pursue a formal diagnosis, I advocate for testing whenever possible, as the potential benefits of appropriate treatment and accommodations far outweigh the costs of continuing to struggle without understanding why.
- **Panelist:** The process of receiving my diagnosis as an autistic person with ADHD created a profound shift in my self-understanding. I experienced an initial three-week elation as pieces of my life experience suddenly made sense. The diagnosis initiated a journey of self-discovery that included extensive online research and connecting with neurodivergent communities. The most valuable aspect of diagnosis wasn't just the label itself. Still, how it changed my relationship with myself — I became less self-critical and developed greater self-forgiveness for traits and behaviors I had previously judged harshly. This internal shift in perspective has been as important as any external accommodations in improving my quality of life and professional effectiveness. Interestingly, 15 years earlier, a psychologist had suggested I might be autistic, which I found so offensive at the time that I never returned to that provider, highlighting how our readiness to receive such information can change over time.
- **Panelist:** My journey to diagnosis began when I sought help for anxiety, which then revealed underlying ADHD symptoms I hadn't previously recognized. Even without needing formal workplace accommodations, understanding my neurodivergence has been transformative for both my professional and personal life. It has helped me understand specific challenges like my difficulty with transitions — for example, why I might be on my phone while waiting for others (because waiting without stimulation is genuinely uncomfortable). Before my diagnosis, I navigated social and professional situations by carefully observing and mimicking what neurotypical people would do in similar circumstances - an exhausting process known as masking. Now, I dedicate time to understanding how my brain naturally works and focus on showing up authentically rather than

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performing neurotypicality, which has significantly improved my wellbeing and effectiveness.

- **Diversity Lab:** The process of self-discovery regarding neurodivergence often begins with a pattern of taking multiple online assessments and quizzes — something neurotypical individuals rarely feel compelled to do. While self-understanding is valuable, there are legitimate reasons some people choose not to pursue a formal diagnosis, including the potential stigma that could impact child custody battles or how medical professionals respond to other health concerns. This highlights the complex personal calculus involved in seeking formal diagnosis and the importance of creating environments where self-identified neurodivergent individuals are respected and supported regardless of formal diagnostic status.

Neurodivergent Strengths and Contributions

- **Panelist:** I view my ADHD and dyslexia as professional superpowers that give me unique skills and perspectives. My tendency toward "rabbit-holing" or hyperfocus allows me to dive deeply into research topics, generating creative ideas and arguments that might not occur to neurotypical colleagues. This ability to think differently and develop innovative approaches is particularly valued in legal practice, where creative argumentation can make a difference in challenging cases. Rather than seeing my neurodivergence solely as a challenge to overcome, I recognize how these cognitive differences have become assets that contribute to my effectiveness as an attorney and the value I bring to my firm.
- **Panelist:** While I don't necessarily frame ADHD as a superpower, I recognize it as a different relationship with attention that can be strategically valuable in legal practice. ADHD affects my ability to control where my attention goes — some things I can't focus on at all, while others receive intense concentration. This variable attention can be leveraged in high-pressure situations; for example, if opposing counsel sends four motions right before trial, my ability to hyperfocus when emotionally engaged means I can produce responses by 9:00 AM the following day. Similarly, when clients present complicated issues, my tendency to dive deeply into problems helps me identify solutions others might miss. These capabilities make me particularly effective in litigation settings where intense focus and problem-solving under pressure are essential skills.
- **Panelist:** As an autistic attorney, I think in pictures rather than words, which gives me a distinct advantage in visualizing legal strategies. Like many autistic individuals, I have "special interests" — mine happens to be the law itself, which has made me particularly adept in my field. When approaching a case, I can visualize the entire path from beginning to end, seeing the most efficient route to resolution. This visual thinking helps tremendously with strategy development, though it can sometimes create challenges in court settings where I might jump

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to conclusions without explaining my reasoning process. This cognitive style has proven especially valuable in my AI law practice, as my mind processes information similarly to AI systems. This natural alignment allows me to extract insights from AI tools that others might miss, giving me a competitive advantage in this emerging field. I've also found AI tools helpful for navigating social situations, as I can ask them about "normal" approaches to various scenarios.

- **Panelist:** I've found AI tools particularly helpful as an autistic person for navigating social situations and understanding neurotypical expectations. I can ask AI about "the normal way" to handle various scenarios, which provides context and information I might otherwise struggle to access. This has been transformative in helping me prepare for unfamiliar social situations, understand appropriate responses, and feel more confident in professional interactions. The ability to privately query AI about social norms and expectations has been incredibly beneficial in my life and practice, allowing me to generate high-quality legal documents through AI in minutes, for example, creating a 140-page answer to a lawsuit in just six minutes.
- **Diversity Lab:** The phenomenon of hyperfocus and special interests among neurodivergent legal professionals often leads to areas of exceptional expertise. Some neurodivergent attorneys develop reputations for excellence in specific areas because they've compensated for challenges. This intense focus and dedication to mastery can create significant value for legal teams, particularly when addressing complex or novel legal questions. We've observed that mixed teams, including both neurotypical and neurodivergent attorneys, often produce the strongest results as they combine different cognitive approaches and strengths. Diverse thinking styles genuinely enhance the quality of legal work and problem-solving.
- **Diversity Lab:** Many neurodivergent professionals engage in extensive "rehearsing" — repeatedly rehearsing conversations, presentations, or interactions in our heads, sometimes for days in advance. This practice may stem from painful experiences of being ridiculed or admonished for social missteps, creating a perfectionistic drive where we feel we must be absolutely perfect in everything. This rehearsal process is an invisible but significant aspect of how many neurodivergent professionals prepare for work interactions that neurotypical colleagues might approach more spontaneously.

Creating Inclusive Legal Environments

- **Panelist:** In our practice, awareness and education are the primary hurdles to creating truly inclusive environments for neurodivergent attorneys. We've observed that often, only neurodivergent individuals themselves attend educational content about neurodiversity, creating a knowledge gap where those who most need to understand these differences remain uninformed. I've frequently wished that the shareholders I work with would engage with this

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content to understand my working style and needs better. Progress requires everyone to become advocates and allies in this space, not just those directly affected by neurodivergence. By expanding education beyond those already interested or impacted, we can create the foundation for meaningful cultural change in how law firms approach neurodiversity.

- **Panelist:** As a leader in our firm, I believe effective leadership requires understanding and supporting all team members, including neurodivergent ones. Just as I wouldn't serve my clients well by ignoring uncomfortable facts, I can't be an effective leader while disregarding neurodiversity. Abundant resources available through social media platforms like Instagram and TikTok make learning about neurodiversity accessible. The legal profession often lacks compassion in its approach to work demands, for example, requesting urgent deliverables without considering an individual's current capacity or family responsibilities. As someone with ADHD who experiences "couch lock" when mentally exhausted, I'm particularly sensitive to how unreasonable timing expectations affect well-being. I've implemented a practice of carefully considering whether requests are truly urgent and appropriate before making demands of my team. The legal profession has many more neurodivergent attorneys than are currently identified, and the mental health toll of long-term masking is severe, contributing to depression, anxiety, and even suicide risk. Creating environments where authenticity is possible is not just about inclusion but preserving lives.
- **Panelist:** In our approach to creating more inclusive environments, we distinguish between an intellectual understanding of neurodiversity and the essential compassion component. Some forward-thinking companies have established neurodiversity committees to address these issues systematically. Increasing representation of neurodivergent individuals throughout the legal system, including in the judiciary, will naturally improve understanding and accommodation. My core philosophy is treating everyone as if they have an invisible disability, which fosters greater compassion throughout the organization. We focus on making others feel at ease in interactions and providing reassurance when social missteps occur, creating psychological safety that benefits everyone regardless of neurotype. This approach shifts the culture from one of judgment to one of mutual support and understanding.
- **Panelist:** I practice the principle of "being the change you want to see" in creating more inclusive environments for neurodivergent attorneys. My firm has done an excellent job supporting my needs as a neurodivergent professional, and I work to extend that support to others through my actions. By openly discussing my experiences and needs, I help destigmatize neurodivergence and create space for others to be authentic. This grassroots approach to cultural change complements more formal initiatives and policies, recognizing that meaningful inclusion often begins with individual courage and openness that gradually shifts collective understanding and behavior.

- **Panelist:** In our approach to diversity and inclusion, we recognize that excluding individuals based on perceived "weirdness" or different communication styles (like focusing intensely on special interests) ultimately harms our practice. We've adopted the perspective that different working styles should be evaluated based on results rather than conformity to neurotypical norms. We apply the same inclusive principles to neurodiversity that we've developed for other aspects of diversity, like gender and sexual orientation. We've found that neurodivergent team members often spot patterns and connections others miss, providing unique insights that strengthen our legal work. By embracing these cognitive differences rather than trying to eliminate them, we gain competitive advantages while creating a more humane workplace for everyone.
- **Diversity Lab:** When considering systemic changes, we need to recognize that the traditional approach to legal training — where junior attorneys are asked to complete tasks they've never done before with minimal guidance, and then heavily criticized for any mistakes — creates disproportionate stress for neurodivergent individuals who may need more context and structure. This approach leads to burnout, which neurodivergent people are at much higher risk for, along with depression and suicide. Creating more supportive training environments would benefit everyone, particularly helping neurodivergent attorneys thrive.