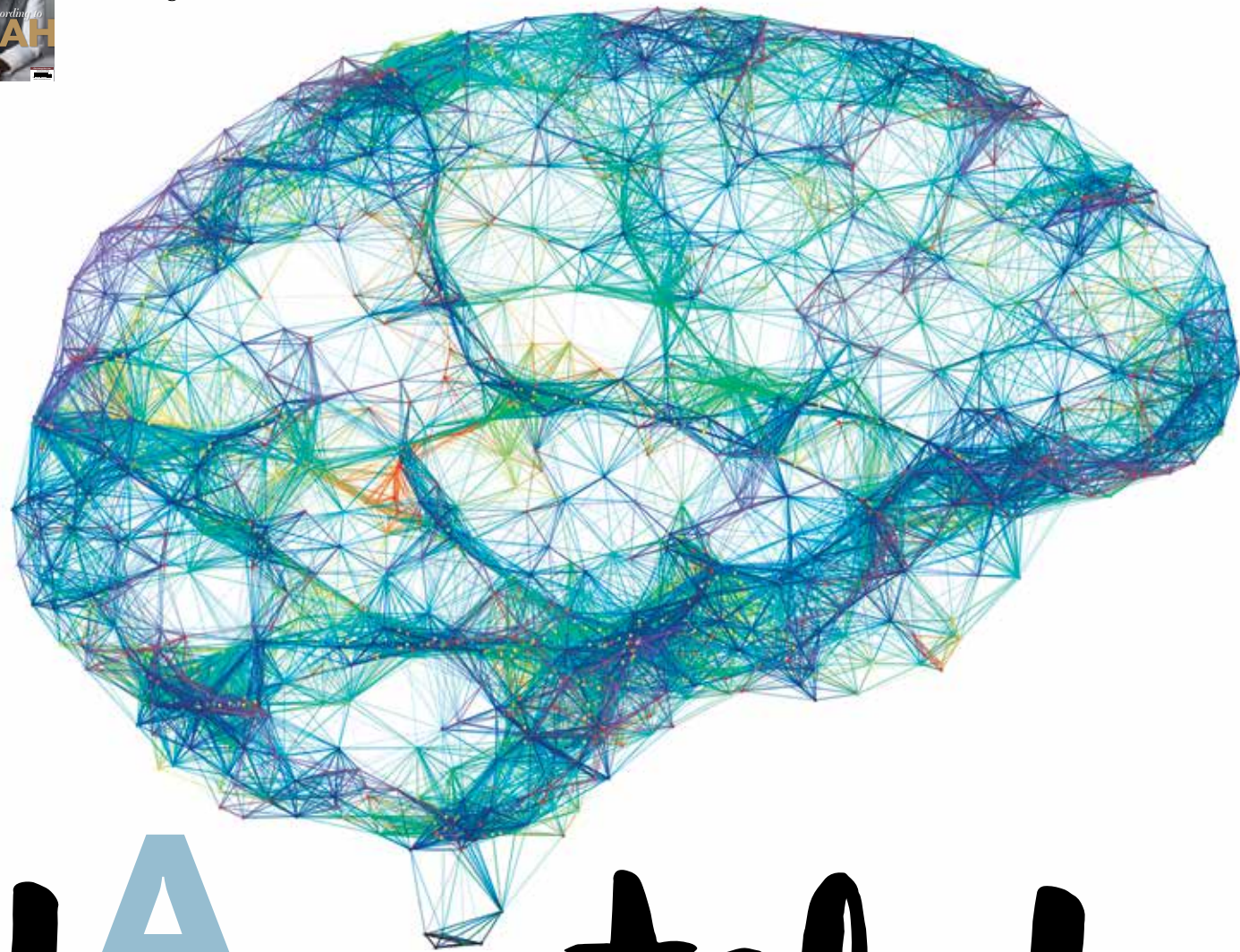




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A beautiful MIND

THE BUSINESS WORLD IS BEGINNING TO RECOGNISE THE BOTTOM-DOLLAR BENEFITS OF NEURODIVERSITY IN THE WORKFORCE, WHICH IS PARTLY DUE TO HIGH-PROFILE ENTREPRENEURS PUBLICLY EMBRACING THEIR CONDITION.

WORDS • JESSICA MUDDITT

Until recently, much of the global business community saw learning disabilities in the workforce simply as a potential quota to fill; a sort of tick-box exercise in diversity.

Attitudes are now beginning to shift thanks to a growing body of research that demonstrates the benefits of achieving a neurodiverse workforce.

Positive change can also be attributed to high-profile executives like Virgin Group's founder Richard Branson and JetBlue's David Neeleman, who have publicly embraced having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Both maintain that they have succeeded in business because of the condition, not in spite of it.

"I think as a society we are getting better at embracing diversity in all its forms and moving away from saying, 'This is what a leader should look like'," says leadership specialist Rebecca Livesey.

Dr Anna Krzeminska agrees. She is undertaking a pioneering study about autism in the workforce at the University of Queensland Business School, and says she has noticed a growing interest in the issue of learning disabilities and inclusion from C-suite members.

While autism is a developmental disorder rather than a learning disability, most people with autism also have a learning disability.

Last year, the first global summit aimed at bringing more autistic adults into the workforce was held in Silicon Valley, with the likes of JP Morgan and EY represented. Microsoft will host the second summit in Seattle this year, while in Sydney, DXC Technology held the Autism@Work Forum in 2017.

"Momentum is building," says Krzeminska. "Disability in the workforce is being reframed: it's increasingly seen not as a cost or obligation but as an opportunity that has a dollar value at the end of the day, through better access to talent and a more inclusive culture."

DISCLOSURE STILL AN ISSUE

However, despite changes occurring at the top level, employees with disabilities often remain reluctant to disclose their condition if it is possible to avoid doing so, as they fear encountering prejudice. According to a recent study by the New York-based Center for Talent Innovation, only 21 per cent of staff willingly inform human resources about having a disability.

"Disclosure is still a big issue because of stigma," explains Krzeminska. "We do have some very well-known figures like Richard Branson who own their ADHD – but they tend to only come out publicly once they have demonstrated their success."

The founder of the Disability Leadership Institute, Christina Ryan, agrees with Krzeminska.

"We know there is a much higher level of disability in the workforce than is openly identified," she says. "People don't

want it to be seen as something that changes how they operate. It's similar to how women behaved when they first got into boardrooms 30 years ago."

REALISING THE BENEFITS

Dr Dale Archer, author of *The ADHD Advantage: What You Thought Was a Diagnosis May Be Your Greatest Strength*, says there is a growing awareness about the positive traits associated with ADHD, such as greater resilience, an ability to devise creative solutions, and being hyper-focused in certain contexts.

"People with ADHD tend not to climb the corporate ladder one step at a time," says the Louisiana-based psychiatrist, who has ADHD himself. "They would go crazy with boredom trying to do that – they tend to do things in their own way and often become entrepreneurs," he explains.

Indeed, a UK study found a genetic link between a dopamine receptor gene variation associated with ADHD and the tendency to be an entrepreneur.

Archer says JetBlue founder Neeleman perfectly summed up the dichotomy of having a learning disability such as ADHD.

"At the end of our interview, he said to me, 'I barely made it through school – my concentration was terrible, I was hyperactive and I got into trouble. How could a brain like that be the same brain that could found a new airline and rethink the aviation industry?'"

GREATEST ASSET

Award-winning advertising executive Lauren Clemett describes dyslexia not as a negative, but as her "greatest asset".

"It's given me the opportunity to work in amazingly creative environments and to set up my own agency. It's a massive part of who I am: it's helped me be less judgemental of myself and others, and to have more self-confidence."

The Yale Center for Dyslexia and Creativity found that the condition can enhance the ability to delegate, solve problems and persevere. And like the findings for ADHD, a 2007 study by London's Cass Business School found that 35 per cent of entrepreneurs in the US showed signs of dyslexia.

"If you ask any creative agency if they have staff with dyslexia, they'll most likely say yes. Creativity isn't necessarily accurate in the traditional sense of having perfect spelling," Clemett says.

She says it's important for her to utilise technology and various support systems, and uses programs such as the content-checker Grammarly to ensure she puts her best foot forward where writing is concerned.

"You are judged by first impressions and if you send off an email that's riddled with spelling errors it will reflect poorly on your personal brand. But these days there are so many tools to help you, so you can focus on what you're good at and not worry about the things you aren't [good at]." ■