**Celebrating Neurodiversity Acceptance Month**

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From the nation's leading supply chain university program. We welcome you to the Penn State Supply Chain podcast brought to you by the Center for Supply Chain Research. Here are your hosts, Steve Tracey and Irv Grossman.

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In honor of April being neurodiversity acceptance month. We are pleased to welcome back, Natalia Lyckowski to the podcast. Nat is the global Neurodiversity advancement leader and supply chain inventory transformation lead at IBM and she joined us previously on season two of the podcast. We're happy to have her back to share more about neurodiversity and answer a few questions that came from our students at the Penn State Smeal College of Business. So welcome back, Nat.

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Thank you so much.

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So, share a bit about the history of neurodiversity acceptance month before we dive into the students Q&A

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April 2nd globally is World Autism Awareness Day celebrated by the United Nations and many organizations and companies have expanded at the month of April to talk about neurodiversity and not only awareness but actionable acceptance and advancement. So it's really a time to reflect on those with neurological differences such as autism ADHD dyslexia and think about the skills that this population has.

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Thanks for joining us again.

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I remember you mentioning to me before and you said that it's part of what we're here to talk about today, that awareness is kind of viewed as a microaggression. Can you talk a little bit about that, please?

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Yeah, absolutely. So awareness is something that we generally say about a disease or a disorder, right? We have breast Cancer Awareness Month, which is very, very important, but we don't have Women's Awareness Month. You know, we have Black History Month, we have Pride Month. So if we want to think of neurodiversity as a form of an identity, then we have to use the same terms.

Also awareness is passive, right? So I could say, oh, I'm aware that you're different. I don't want you on my team or part of my organization. I don't want to make any accommodations for you, but I'm aware. So we really want to focus on that sense of acceptance and pride and celebration.

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Thank you for clarifying that.

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As I mentioned, these questions came from our Supply Chain Management Association students here at Smeal College of Business. And many of them got to see you in person when you spoke with our dean as part of our executive insights. Last year, I will remind everyone that that was the best attended executive insights of the entire season. So that's uh really important to note. How do neurodivergent people take advantage of their particular skills and differences to excel in a supply chain profession?

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In a supply chain profession. And really in any profession, it's all about innovation and creative problem solving and being agile. So if you look at the neurodivergent population, while it right now, uh latest studies are either one in 20 I just saw recently. One in seven individuals are neurodivergent. If you look at the skills that, that talent pool can bring 32% new skills, more patents, 66% higher job loyalty, improving corporate citizenship and revenue.

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But many neurodivergents think nonlinear so can see the whole forest for the trees or come at problems and there are always problems in supply chain or I'd like to think of them as challenges that if we have people coming at these problems and challenges from different perspectives that may be overlooked or may be stifled.

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You're losing that talent, that sense of collaboration. And it's not only in, in our thoughts but even in our supply chain providers, right? You know, the diversity of, of the supply chain as well.

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Now collectively, Irv and I have been in the supply chain profession for over 80 years and I,

I don't recall us ever running into problems.

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No, never, never. Everything works perfect.

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You know, I mean, you hear stories about tragically that ships run into bridges and things like that, but I don't know if they really happen. I don't know a real thing.

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So another question from the students. How can we promote neurodiversity, acceptance within the workplace? And in turn, how can we include everyone's differences to become a stronger team?

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I love that question and it really hits a lot of other diversity factors, right? It talks, you know how to be an ally, but acceptance talks with building a different culture, building a safe space culture where people feel free to share that they are neurodivergent and all of the gifts that comes with it.

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It's knowing that like if I share my pronouns that let somebody know that, you know. I want to hear theirs and it builds that welcoming environment. So if you can focus on saying the words neurodivergent, we're neurodivergent, friendly, we value all ideas that usually is enough to let somebody feel that sense of psychological safety and then they don't have to mask or, you know, deal with imposter syndrome and they could give all of their thoughts and energy to the task at hand.

So, it's saying the words and being cognizant of, you know, unconscious bias and fear, you know, it's, it's speaking with empathy and understanding and transparency and vulnerability and allowing us all to be better humans.

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So there's a question here from the students that want to know a little bit about your backstory. So as a supply chain professional, what led you to become uh the advocate that you are for neurodiversity?

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I was recognized as neurodivergent when I was in college. And I again use recognized instead of diagnosed because this is part of my identity. It's not something to be cured. So the first, you know, 20 years of my life, I really thought I was broken. Lots of dark self doubt, not so nice thoughts, but getting that recognition was like that aha moment of like getting glasses for the first time and realizing that these things that have been troubling me actually can be put to use as superpowers, right?

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If you know, I was asked, you know, how are you at multitasking? And I'm like, well, I'm an ADHDer. Hold my beer.

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Is that OK?

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If you're over 21, you're good but never do it in the workplace.

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No, never. Never, never do it in the workplace.

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Linkedin now has dyslexic thinking as a skill that you can highlight on your profile. Uh because there's so much new innovation that's brought when people think differently.

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But I would say the true spark was working with my own son who was recognized as being neurodivergent, very young and seeing him struggle during that transition from high school to university to trying to find a job and things like, you know, job fairs, right? We don't have, you know, a quiet space or alternative ways of doing things. It could be just as discriminatory if there were no elevator for somebody using a wheelchair to get to it and I kind of got into that, you know, angry mama bear mode and said, OK, we have to work to change this. And at the same time, IBM's Neurodiversity initiative was starting. So it was a perfect place for me to land and try to spearhead some of these efforts. And next year will be our 10 year anniversary of having a neurodiversity program at IBM. So you better start planning for the party.

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Congratulations to IBM.

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That's great news.

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Yeah. So I have a question here from a student that goes like this and I'm going to add a little bit of a twist to it. It goes, how can companies promote a more inclusive and accommodating workplace environment for neurodivergent employees?

Now, my adder to this is realizing that we've moved a lot more virtual in how we perform work these days. So, in the course of what we do physically inside of offices, which is what a lot of people always go back to, but how we do it in a virtual environment?

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Yeah. So if COVID had a silver lining; which was really hard to think of anything during that time frame of having a silver lining; it was that it taught companies that people can work efficiently, remotely or in some cases even more efficiently, remotely.

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Having people be able to control their own sensory diet, their own lighting, their own sense of noise level, you know, not sitting near the kitchenette or the elevator that, that makes all of these kinds of noises.

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But with that virtual also comes some biases like cameras on versus cameras off or you're not looking at me, you know, on the Webex because I'm taking notes. Well, you know, what does that mean? Are you not paying attention?

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But for the neurodivergent, it also could be distracting as well. Like I'm not listening to what you're saying. I'm trying to see what books are, you know, sitting on Steve's desk, I'm sure there are, you know, a lot about supply chain or you know what kind of plant that is.

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And so the same kind of social that we would want for an office, like uh send somebody a message before you just, you know, barge in on them or knock on their door. The same thing you would have in that, in that same virtual space. The other goes to that sense of empathy. Like, you know, maybe you are, you know, have an elderly parent that's in the same house with you, right? You wouldn't want them to be hurt because you don't want to, you know, drop from a call. So from a physical space. Yeah.

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And then accommodations for neurodivergents are part of the Americans with Disabilities Act. So companies that are not aware of that they could be putting themselves at a precariously litigious space if they're not, but just being able to be open and honest and share what you need to succeed. And you know, maybe you're a night owl, maybe you're, you know, a morning lark having managers trained and when you train for neurodiversity acceptance, the empathy goes across maybe people who uh English isn't their first language or you know, people from different cultures that if you can talk about these things just as you would ne diversity, you can build that safe space culture.

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You were talking about the COVID silver lining. I refer to as COVID lemonade, right? COVID was a was a big batch of lemons and, and for those people that were, that took use of it, you know. Uh what did Winston Churchill say? Never let a good crisis go to waste. We, we did get some good positive outcomes from that.

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Now, what's your vision of the future? I mean, obviously, you know, we're in April 2024 we've got neurodivergent acceptance and conversations going about that. That's a huge advancement from, as you said, 10 years ago. But what's the future look like for this?

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I think the future of this would be maybe let's just think outside the box here or maybe there is no box and we don't need a special month to focus on this, right? Or maybe it's neurodiversity Pride Month. And we talk about, you know, famous figures in our history that were neurodivergent that helped bust down some of these barriers to these issues.

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You know, maybe 20 years from now, Steve, this podcast will be required reading at, you know, at a, at a neurodiversity history course. And, and I really pity those students for that, but I, I envisioned where saying you're neurodivergent is as accepted as saying, you know, I need eyeglasses or I'm left handed.

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So, can I sit to the other side of you? So we don't spill our wine when we're having a drink?

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Not that there's these taboos and things set in whispers like on the spectrum like um you know, is there an Asian spectrum? Is there a you know LGBT spectrum? Is there an age spectrum? It's it's just being human

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How can we and that students and individuals, raise awareness of neurodiversity or, or excuse me, not awareness, acceptance?

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I think it's having the courage to talk about it, right? If you are neurodivergent, it can take a lot to be able to share that aspect of your life with others. You know, it's something you can't see, it might be like, you know, your sexual identity or your age, you, you can't just look at somebody and know this.

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So I think putting these words into our common lexicon that you're building that place where people can say I'm dyslexic and I have a video recording of that book instead of an actual paper textbook without any fear of stigma or somebody saying I'm autistic,

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I don't pick up on social cues can you be very clear with your feedback as opposed to saying, oh I'm autistic and now nobody wants to be on your team or the teacher suddenly gets very pedantic with you thinking that, you know, you need a lot of support which may or may not be true, but it may or may not be true for somebody who's not.

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But I think it's sharing the information and I think for the allies to try to set back some of that fear of saying the wrong thing. If you start with that some place of empathy, like, you know, somebody says I'm neurodivergent and you don't go, oh I'm so sorry, right. Somebody says I'm neurodivergent and you go thank you so much for sharing. How can I help you? Right?

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Or you know, you know, also can say something like I don't know much about neurodiversity. Can you help me, or I've only met a few neurodivergent people? And I know everyone is different. Can you help me how to be the best ally for you and having that sense of empathy, being able to have conversations, you know, with radical candor on both sides is I think what's needed, we have to remove the fear of on both, you know, and having everybody meet, meet in the middle.

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You know, these questions come from students. And I'm thinking to myself as I was a freshman and a sophomore, taking courses in the forum with a couple of 100 people that this also probably being able to, to advocate uh for as an instructor is probably pretty challenging too, any coaching points for that?

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Yeah, I would say both the students and the teachers should be educated on what is available. You know, every school should be having an office of disability services. And yes, there's a lot of stigma around is neurodivergent a disability or not. And we could have a whole separate podcast on language but make available those resources.

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It is something that the school needs to do like by law, but it's something that can help everyone and removing those stigmas to say I need to take this exam in the testing center where it's quiet and I don't have 400 people wiggling and scratching and where I can concentrate or the lecture is going to be recorded or I'm going to use a particular piece of tech to help me level the playing field, right? And not add any extra burdens that would discourage me from doing my best in school.

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It's interesting that you pointed out that the same applies not just to students but to faculty as a result of the multiyear relationship that I've had with that. One of the things that I've done is in my core syllabus, I point out that my acceptance statement for all students, neurodiversity is called out. But as any other community that may feel that they are either underrepresented or underappreciated. I call that out in my syllabus and I let people know that the classroom is a safe place and if you have any challenges or issues with anything, please come talk to me and I have had several students come talk to me and, and point that out.

Am I getting 100%? I doubt it. Right. But more than I got before because I never brought it up, never even thought to brought it up. So hopefully, if other faculty are listening to this, that they would adopt that practice as well.

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Now, what are some of the common misconceptions or even myths about neurodiverse people? I would say most people think neurodiversity is a synonym for autism. That neurodiversity is an umbrella term. You know, that's the myth, neurodiversity is an umbrella term to categorize people with a neurological difference than the norm, right? Could be born with, could be acquired over time. For example, returning veterans with, you know, traumatic brain injury may, may now think in a different way. So all of that is covered under, you know, that neurodiversity umbrella.

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Some other stereotypes or misconceptions are that autistics are only little boys and that you grow out of it. So you traditionally see that light blue baby blue color on ribbons and you know, ribbons are traditionally used for medical issues like, you know, a lot of cancers. So the whole ribbon thing you know, is, is not a great thing to do. The puzzle piece being a good icon for autism. Um because autistics are whole people. So those bright primary colors, the puzzle piece, a lot of these things, you know, make you feel that it's only a thing that happens to kids. And if you look up in a lot of resources, there are resources for parents but not, you know, neurodivergent adults that might need help making a budget for their apartment or how to live independently. The other is on socio-economic discrimination and race and gender. Like you can't be autistic, you're a girl or you know, there's a very high percentage of incarcerated men of color that were not recognized as neurodivergent as a youth because they were just a bad kid. And again, that goes back to acceptance education.

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So it's going by the the latest thing, it's one in seven people, there's no identifier, right? To know that this is going on inside somebody's brain, right? There's no, you know, special tattoo or special handshake, although it would be cool to kind of make one. So when you see somebody, you do the little handshake and they know, but you know that we have to treat everyone with that sense of empathy and respect and understanding, you know, regardless of their neurotype.

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The other misconception is that we're all a little neurodivergent and we're not. It's an identity, right? We're not all a little black, we're not all a little woman we're not all a little gay. It is an identity and in my opinion,an identity comes from within.

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So there might be people that are trying to get a diagnosis and I know you sometimes need the diagnosis in order to get the accommodations for school, you know, your extended time or whatever you need to have that proof. But that is very hard to get. And people need to understand that, you know, depending on your provider, do they have a bias? What tests,

what evaluation tools are they using? Do those have a bias against women or? So it's, it's definitely something that we have to take a look at if I went to a specialist and they said, no, you're not a woman. I'll be like, well, I am, but it also goes to that sense of allyship, right? Who is speaking for the community, a common misconception is that you can get a phd in psychology and then be an expert in neurodiversity. Well, I can, I as a white woman could get a phd and let's just say Asian studies, but I'm still an ally, right? It's not that sense of, of self.

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Do you any final thoughts you like to share with our listeners and students?

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I would just say, think about sharing your full self. Um There's probably a lot of folks battling imposter syndrome to think I'm not, I'm not enough or I that I'm not worthy of asking for this accommodation or that I should just, you know, buck it up or suck it up and you don't need to.

I'm hoping that, you know, your professors are as kind as Steve here that Penn State is growing to be a safe space for all, not only neurodivergents but all individuals and ask somebody how you could help, right. It doesn't matter the accommodation or whether they have this or that just try to be more human.

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Well, on behalf of Penn State and Smeal College of Business, the Department of Supply Chain Information Systems and the Center for Supply Chain Research.

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That's a mouthful.

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We would like to thank Natalia who goes by Nat Lyckowski for joining us today for our podcast. She's a revisit from years ago, but we wanted to honor her for coming and joining us for neurodiversity acceptance month.

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Thank you so much.

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Really appreciate you joining us today.

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You bet you, let's keep the conversation going.

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