Blog article:

Neurodiverse staff in SMEs: A conversation with Dr. Judith Rommel, founder of BZND

30% MORE EFFECTIVE: NEURODIVERGENCE aka THE POWER BOOSTER

For the successful British businessman Sir Richard Branson, his dyslexia had never been a weakness but a gift because "it helped me learn the art of delegation, focus my skills and work with incredible people." His success speaks for itself – and proves that neuro-inclusion makes perfect sense. Studies show that neurodiverse workforces have a higher collective intelligence, handle challenges more effectively, make more qualified decisions and are about 30% more productive. And: If the inclusion of neurodiverse colleagues succeeds, the collaboration and productivity of the teams improve significantly.

Taking the world of work… thumbs up!

Corporations like SAP, Microsoft and IBM already work with neurodiverse staff. With the help of individualized programs, they guide their new colleagues from onboarding to daily work routines and provide the teams with active support. How can SMEs embrace this new development even with limited resources? Dr. Judith Rommel gives us some answers. About four years ago, she founded BZND Centre for Neurodiversity e.V., working to improve the lives of neurodivergent individuals.

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Why did you establish BZND e.V. and what exactly does the Centre for Neurodiversity do?

Our team of experts aims to raise awareness about neurodiversity. We examine fields like economy, or science and perspectives from people concerned to develop practical approaches that improve acceptance and equal opportunities for neurodivergent individuals.
One of our projects is Lilevi, for instance, a non-profit online platform that facilitates the offering and searching for sensory-friendly living spaces. Lilevi is a social innovation project based on applied research in cooperation with a university.

Why are neurodivergent employees a true asset for companies? What skills make them 'particularly valuable'?

Neurodivergent colleagues bring valuable skills to a company – from a strong sense of justice and distinct empathy to critical thinking, pattern recognition and systems thinking. Depending on the degree of neuro-divergence, they are extremely focused, keep calm and reflected in stressful situations or score with risk-taking and innovative spirit.

Can you give us an example?

Neurodivergent people have specialist knowledge in various fields which helps companies to develop creative solutions, work more effectively and position themselves for long-term success.

While autistic persons in a suitable environment score with a high ability to focus, passion for detail and analytical thinking, people with

ADHD contribute flexibility and creativity. Highly sensitive people (HSP) are very empathic.

Gifted people are quick thinkers and comfortable with solving complicated, interconnected problems. People with dyslexia often score with strong spatial thinking – a variety of skills that make companies resilient and enrich the corporate culture.

In other words, neurodivergent people can certainly help compensating the acute skill shortage?

Yes! Many neurodivergent people are highly qualified yet underemployed or excluded from the employment market – whether due to rigid structures or a lack of adaption to their strengths because companies fear the efforts involved. Studies show that only a fraction of people on the autism spectrum have permanent contracts, and gifted people or individuals with ADHD also reach their limits in traditional working conditions. Companies which establish flexible structures and support individual potential cannot only counteract skill shortages but also secure innovative power and unique selling propositions (USP).

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How can SMEs with limited resources cope with neuro-inclusion?

With simple yet effective measures: Clear, direct communication, flexible working hours, remote work possibilities, and tranquil workplaces help best exploit individual skills. It means, for instance, writing down expected activities exceeding the core tasks or providing designated car parks. Besides early or late working hours, part-time work is easy to implement. Working from home enables focused work in a low-stimulus environment, without additional pressure due to social interaction or uncontrolled environmental stimuli.

Elisa Schwed, production manager in a medium-sized company: “We have a colleague who is very sensitive to fragrances and compliant with

rules. She has tasks that allow her to work more independently. Her workplace is somewhat apart from the others. Additionally, she can organize her working schedule freely."

"Medium-sized companies often (still) lack specialized professionals addressing neurodivergence. Therefore, managers rely on open dialogue with the colleagues concerned" knows Anja Friesen from her 15-year experience as an HR manager in SMEs. Depending on the neurodivergence, regular check-ins can be adapted – for instance, more frequent feedback sessions for people with ADHD or greater autonomy for highly gifted individuals. Technical solutions like noise-cancelling headphones can provide support. It is crucial to involve neurodiverse colleagues actively and ask about their needs – little adjustments often have a significant impact. Especially small companies with a more personalized approach can implement individual solutions more easily through a mentoring system.

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According to Anja Friesen, "an open communication culture that considers neurodivergent characteristics not as weaknesses but as facets of personality is indispensable for successful integration".

How can you and the BZND support companies?

The BZND helps companies find adequate contacts and practical solutions for a more inclusive working environment. Additionally, we welcome strategic partnerships to shape sustainable changes together – for instance, through our housing platform facilitating sensory-friendly living for neurodivergent individuals.

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Bei Veröffentlichung freuen wir uns über ein Belegexemplar.

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