

How Advisors With Autism, ADHD, and Other Neurodivergent Traits Are Stepping Out of the Shadows -- Barrons.com

Publication info: Dow Jones Institutional News ; New York [New York]. 17 May 2022.

[ProQuest document link](#)

FULL TEXT

By Charles Paikert

Odds are that most financial advisory firms have team members who are neurodivergent -- individuals who have ADHD, autism, dyslexia, or another manifestation of brain functioning different from what's commonly considered typical or normal.

While more advisors are specializing in working with special-needs clients, advisors themselves who are neurodivergent have, until recently, been a hidden minority, left to cope with professional challenges on their own. But that's beginning to change. Last fall the Financial Planning Association launched a first of its kind support group, called "Neurodivergent Planner Knowledge Circle." Other online community groups have formed since then as neurodivergent advisors increasingly attempt to focus industry attention on their needs, strengths, and challenges.

Approximately 15% to 20% of the population may have neurodivergent characteristics, according to the Encyclopedia Britannica.

"Given that this is a very entrepreneurial industry, I suspect we trend higher than the average," says Alan Moore, CEO and co-founder of XY Planning Network, who has ADHD, or attention deficit hyperactive disorder.

"Neurodiverse individuals bring a special intelligence to the job and tend to be more analytical and hyperfocused," says Andrew Komarow, CEO and founder of Planning Across the Spectrum, a Connecticut-based RIA that specializes in special-needs planning.

Komarow, who has autism, believes as many as 20% of advisory firm team members may be neurodivergent.

"Financial advice has an entrepreneurial mindset and flexibility. It can be a great profession for them," he says. But neurodivergent advisors also face plenty of challenges.

Jessica Goedtel, a planner who has ADHD, had difficulties with large group meetings that lasted for more than half an hour when she worked for larger firms. "I became a solo advisor for a reason," says Goedtel, who launched her own firm, Pavilion Financial Planning, in Allentown, Pa., last year.

Chad Duncan, a planner who also has ADHD, struggled with time management issues in the structured environment of larger firms and began his own RIA, Minimalist Financial, in 2020.

Komarow realized that making small talk with clients wasn't best suited for him. Other autistic individuals may have difficulty picking up on social cues, while some may have acute anxiety or become obsessed with details. The FPA started the Knowledge Circle last fall "to provide financial planners who identify as neurodivergent a safe community where they can engage with and learn from each other," says Ben Lewis, the organization's chief communications office.

Komarow, one of the founders of the FPA initiative, became unhappy with advisors' ability to access the Knowledge Circle and went on to start a Facebook Group for neurodivergent advisors. Other support groups have formed on LinkedIn, Discord (an instant messaging channel), and on informal Zoom calls.

"We discuss dealing with specific situations with our clients and how we function in our role," says Goedel. "It's very comforting hearing other people struggle with the same issues I do and to share best practices."

What can advisory firms do for their neurodivergent employees?

While XY Planning Network doesn't have any programs specifically for neurodivergent team members, it does "cultivate a work environment that is supportive of different working styles and needs," Moore says.

In addition to a flexible work-from-home policy, XY also has "unlimited vacation days, which provides the flexibility for those who suffer from anxiety and may need a more curated days-off schedule," he adds.

Accommodating the needs of neurodivergent advisors is critical, says Komarow.

"Advisory firms are likely to overlook quirks of top performers," he says. "They should be willing to do the same for neurodivergent advisors. Some may need a slight adjustment in their work schedule, others may have a sensitivity to a certain kind of light. If someone's strength isn't client-facing, there are so many different parts of the business they may be well suited for, like compliance or investment research."

RIAs need to recognize the strengths that neurodivergent employees bring to the firm and provide training, patience, understanding, and support, says Cynthia Haddad, partner at Affinia Financial Group and co-author, with her business partner John Nadworny, of *The Special Needs Planning Guide*.

"Neurodivergent advisors can have huge benefits for firms," adds Haddad's colleague, Affinia wealth advisor Alexandria Dunn. "They can be so brilliant, are extremely dependable, detail oriented, and don't get tired of doing the same thing over and over again. But firms should make sure they're supported and matched with advisors who can complement their strengths."

Abacus Wealth Partners is "pretty early on" in the process of developing policies for neurodivergent staffers, according to J.D. Bruce, the firm's chief of growth. "We still have much work to do to codify our processes and procedures to support this community, but we strive to be an inclusive and equitable environment."

To help "both neurotypical and neurodiverse employees succeed," Bruce says, Abacus offers coaching, tutoring assistance and study time for employees taking the Series 66 and CFP exams, one-on-one role-playing, and office hours with top executives.

Wescott Financial Advisory Group in Philadelphia has "not explored neurodiversity as a specific defined area of counseling or support," says CEO Grant Rawdin. But Wescott does employ a psychologist to help its staff achieve "better performance relative to their own characteristics," Rawdin adds.

Some of Wescott's 50-plus employees "may well have some form of mild neurodiversity," says firm psychologist Harold Weinstein. "We like quirky and encourage each person to reach his, her, or their potential."

However, firms find it "difficult to establish baselines and track progress unless people voluntarily self-identify," notes Michael Nathanson, CEO of The Colony Group.

So should advisors disclose whether they are neurodivergent?

The "vast majority" of neurodivergent individuals don't like sharing personal information, according to Komarow.

"There are still too many preconceived notions, biases, and misconceptions. It's probably not worth it."

Goedel, for example, never disclosed to an employer that she has ADHD. "I don't think we're there yet as a society," she says.

Duncan doesn't think his behavior needs an explanation. "If I'm running late," he says, "I don't have to say it's because of my brain versus just asking if we can reschedule."

While disclosing neurodivergency to an employer "should theoretically allow for more support and understanding," Moore points out, "our industry doesn't have a great track record for supporting diversity. I completely understand someone choosing to not disclose to avoid it having a negative impact on their career."

What advice would he give to someone who would like to be a financial advisor and has ADHD, autism, Tourette Syndrome, or another neurodivergent trait?

"Ultimately it's about finding or creating the environment that will allow you to thrive," he says. "This is a profession that can support who you are and your strengths, but your first job – or three – might not show you that. Just keep trying until you find the right fit."

Look for support says Goedel. "Find your people. You shouldn't do it alone."

Dunn suggests that a would-be advisor who is neurodivergent shadow someone at a firm first. "See what it's like," she says. "Make sure you like the people and the environment. See if you're comfortable with client meetings."

Know thyself, advises Komarow. "It's super-important to know what you like to do and why you like to do it," he says. "Carve out something that's a little bit different. If you get stuck in details and miss everything else, partner with someone who is good at the stuff you're not."

And don't succumb to social pressure you're not comfortable with, he adds. "Don't learn to golf if you don't want to golf."

Write to advisor.editors@barrons.com

(END)

May 17, 2022 14:57 ET (18:57 GMT)

DETAILS

Subject:	Autism; Neurodiversity; Advisors; Planning; Employees; Psychologists
Business indexing term:	Subject: Employees
Publication title:	Dow Jones Institutional News; New York
Publication year:	2022
Publication date:	May 17, 2022
Publisher:	Dow Jones & Company Inc
Place of publication:	New York
Country of publication:	United States, New York
Publication subject:	Business And Economics
Source type:	Wire Feed
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	News
ProQuest document ID:	2665411153
Document URL:	https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/how-advisors-with-autism-adhd-other/docview/2665411153/se-2?accountid=44910
Copyright:	Copyright Dow Jones & Company Inc May 17, 2022
Last updated:	2022-05-18
Database:	ABI/INFORM Collection

Database copyright © 2022 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)