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Background

Autistic and neurodivergent employees often face unique challenges in professional environments—challenges that are amplified when performance evaluations are based on subjective social norms rather than measurable job outputs. As documented in both internal assessments and scholarly literature, autistic women are especially impacted due to the prevalence of “masking” behaviors, which are efforts to suppress or camouflage traits in order to conform to neurotypical standards (Hull et al. 309). This not only leads to internal stress and burnout but also to misinterpretation and bias during evaluations (Cleary et al. 800).

Mount St. Mary’s University has an opportunity to become a leader in workplace equity by addressing these barriers directly. Our current evaluation practices inadvertently prioritize extroverted behaviors, penalizing employees who are quiet, formal, or struggle with small talk (all traits common among autistic individuals). Without formal structures in place, reports of bullying, exclusion, or biased treatment also go unaddressed, contributing to high turnover and reduced job satisfaction.

Proposed Solution

I propose the development and implementation of a universal design-based performance evaluation system tailored to support neurodivergent employees. Along with a confidential reporting tool for workplace bias, exclusion, or bullying.

The evaluation system should:

- Focus on behavior-based, job-relevant criteria rather than subjective ideas like “team fit” or informal bonding.
- Allow for written communication options (e.g., via email or Teams) during feedback sessions for employees who experience anxiety or communication difficulties (Hayward et al. 299).
- Offer multiple assessment formats, such as self-assessments, peer reviews, and project portfolios, which align with diverse cognitive styles.

The reporting system should:

- Be anonymous, confidential, and accessible online.
- Be managed by HR but include third-party review mechanisms to maintain neutrality and safety.
- Allow employees to report bullying, discriminatory language, or exclusionary behavior without fear of retaliation.

Why This Matters

Autistic employees (especially women) are often expected to perform invisible labor to “fit in” with neurotypical norms, a process that results in exhaustion, depression, and identity confusion (Hull et al. 310; Cleary et al. 802). Workplace discrimination, both overt and subtle, is a major cause of burnout and trauma. When ignored, this leads to a cycle of mental health decline, underperformance, and job loss (Cleary et al. 803).

This proposal directly addresses those risks by:

- Creating a structure where all employees are evaluated fairly based on their work, not their personality or communication style.
- Giving neurodivergent employees a safe channel to report misconduct.
- Reinforcing Mount St. Mary’s values of inclusivity, respect, and academic integrity.

Relevant Stakeholders

- **Human Resources:** Will lead training, manage the reporting tool, and adjust evaluation protocols.
- **Department Heads & Supervisors:** Will be trained in inclusive evaluation and feedback strategies.
- **Neurodivergent Employees:** Will be consulted through surveys and focus groups to inform tool design.
- **DEI Office:** Will monitor the effectiveness of the new systems and ensure alignment with university-wide diversity goals.

Intended Outcomes

- Increased retention and job satisfaction among neurodivergent employees.
- A measurable decrease in reports of biased evaluations or workplace exclusion.
- A university culture that values diversity in communication, working styles, and cognitive functioning.
- Greater institutional knowledge of autism and neurodivergence in professional settings.

Conclusion

As Hayward et al. found in their study, autistic women thrive when there is alignment between the job, the person, and the work environment (299). By creating a formalized, behavior-based review system and a confidential reporting tool, Mount St. Mary's can remove systemic barriers and show a commitment to equity beyond surface-level inclusion. Most importantly, it will allow autistic and neurodivergent employees to work as their authentic selves—without fear of misjudgment or exclusion.

Works Cited

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- Hayward, Susan M., Keith R. McVilly, et al. "'I would love to just be myself': What autistic women want at work." *Autism in Adulthood*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1 Dec. 2019, pp. 297–305, <https://doi.org/10.1089/aut.2019.0020>.
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