From the Field

Neurodivergent People in the Library Workplace

Perspectives from a Couple of Autistic Library and Technology Nerds

Cindi Trainor Blyberg and Shanna Hollich

Note: This issue's "From the Field" was written by two ITAL *editorial board members and column editors to highlight their experiences in, and perspectives on, library and library-adjacent work, as neurodivergent people. The first section involves telling personal stories of self-discovery, so each author's ideas and responses appear separately. Other sections of this column were co-authored in a more traditional, collaborative sense.*

COMING AUT

Cindi: I want everyone to know: I have autism. I've known all my life that somehow, I was different. People's reactions sometimes mystify me. I can be terrible at navigating social situations or tasks without guidance. Parties terrify me. I am a self-starter, but change is hard. Surprises are hard. Vague management styles can be hard. I often did not know how to tell people why these were hard or to ask for what I needed.

In spite of this, I have had a thirty-year career in libraryland. I have run departments and divisions, participated in library administration, and held visible positions at well-known library companies (Springshare forever!). I have spoken all over the world, before small groups and big crowds. I was an ALA division president and am still active on the ITAL editorial board and in ALA Division and Round Table committees.

These two ideas are contradictory, but I am able to mask autistic traits when I need to, based on previous experiences. (For those unfamiliar with this term, masking is the conscious or subconscious suppression of autistic behaviors.) Personal relationships are more successful if I am gregarious, witty, insightful, smart. The way to give back to my profession is to serve, to speak, to publish. The way to be successful in my job is to run with a great idea within the parameters of that position and to be involved in leadership enough that I can identify those political lines over which I otherwise spectacularly trip. Masking, however, takes its toll and can lead to autistic burnout.

It's undeniable that part of this success is also a result of working with technology. A piece of technology either works or it doesn't, meets a need or fails to do so. There are no facial expressions or social hierarchies to navigate, and each investigation or implementation becomes a puzzle to solve, often engaging two other neurodivergent traits: hyperfocus and special interests.

Shanna: Cindi's experiences are very relatable to me and are one of the reasons I was excited to work together with them for this column. I, too, have spent a lifetime knowing that I was different.

About the Authors
Cindi Trainor Blyberg (cindi@blyberg.net; corresponding author) and **Shanna Hollich** (shollich@gmail.com) have contributed brief author bios at the end of this column.

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Like many marginalized folks, I am very familiar with being the "only" one in the room, from being the only person of my religion, or the only person with an unusual sort of family structure, or even the only person with curly hair. I've always been marked as an "other," and it took me until middle age to figure out that some of that "other"-ness included autism and ADHD.

I went through so many labels over the years trying to figure out how to explain my differences in a way that would make sense to everyone else and, ultimately, to me. Some of these labels came early and easily: being the only kid in my school with curly hair was unusual and resulted in some occasional teasing, but it never caused me to feel concern for my safety. Being the palest person in the room, the fattest person in the room, the only Jewish person in the room, the smartest kid in the room—these all became vital and important parts of my identity, and I learned to wear my differences with a sense of defiant pride. And, when things still didn't feel quite right, when I still wasn't sure I understood who I was, I dug deeper and discovered other aspects of my identity. I'm Disabled, I'm nonbinary / genderqueer, I'm bisexual—surely, these are all things that would make me feel "other"ed in many places. This, clearly, was the answer.

Until it wasn't. Like Cindi, my resume is filled with accomplishments. I have worked in almost every type of library; I have been a director of multiple libraries; I have literally traveled the world to talk about librarianship, open access, technology, and copyright. I still sometimes struggle with thinking of many of my behaviors as "masking," since I learned very quickly, and at a very young age, the rules that I was required to follow in order to blend in. I assumed these were simply the things that a person, any person, does in order to survive and succeed in this life. I thought everyone struggled to perform "human-ness," as I often call it. It seemed natural to me that everyone should put forth an exhausting amount of effort to appear "normal" in their everyday life. My friends and coworkers would constantly tell me: "You can't be autistic! You're so likable / You're making eye contact with me right now / You're not scared of public speaking / You don't act like my autistic cousin / [insert other well-meaning but clearly ableist sentiment here]." I have only just begun to un-learn these toxic stereotypes that caused me to constantly question, and sometimes reject, parts of who I really am.

It's worth noting that a preponderance of literature on autism is very much cisgender-male dominated, which results in people assigned female at birth frequently getting a diagnosis later in life. Research has also (PR here) shown that there is a significant overlap of the autistic and queer communities.[1] From a very young age, I was painfully aware that many unspoken societal rules and norms are gender-based. Once I discovered that my gender did not exist within a strict male/female binary, I remember feeling relieved, as if these particular rules would become clearer to me. Spoiler alert: they did not magically become clearer, and I may very well spend a lifetime disentangling societal impositions regarding both neurotypicality AND gender.

THE WORK ENVIRONMENT AND NEURODIVERGENT LIBRARY WORKERS

Different neurodivergent traits manifest in different ways, and they often do not mesh with work environments built for neurotypical people, which can require masking. Complicating matters is the fact that neurodivergence is a broad umbrella term, encompassing a diverse array of thought patterns, behavioral traits, cognitive functions, learning preferences, and ways of conceptualizing social interactions or emotional regulation. As autism researcher and advocate Dr. Stephen Shore has famously said, "If you've met one person with autism, you've met one person with autism." This can make it not only hard to pinpoint which parts of the work environment may have the most impact, but it can also make it difficult for an autistic person to adequately understand and communicate their own needs and preferences.

Every day is a wild balance of working in a distracting environment; thinking adequately about and planning tasks so that they sufficiently meet goals; navigating ANY conversation while observing and interpreting facial expressions and body language that inform an adequate response; and trying to juggle and interpret the larger political context of our jobs while ensuring our own success. Throw in trying to not let too-tight shoes or a scratchy tag or a co-worker's Teams alert pull our attention away from the task at hand. Navigating tense or high-stakes meetings can require more preparation than normal to achieve a successful outcome without damaging the social and work relationships involved. They require a focus on all participants' body language, facial expressions, and tones of voice, on top of tracking meeting content, action items, and formulating one's own input. For some neurodivergent people, *every* meeting involves this level of effort and its resulting subsequent exhaustion. Managing all of this requires copious downtime for recovery. It's also cumulative and can result in autistic burnout that can take months to resolve. In a typical work environment, these stresses are often downplayed, and it can be difficult to explain the degree to which they can be truly all-consuming to people with autism.

Shanna has another illustrative example. They are often the person in the library who knows the most about a new software system or technology and ends up teaching it to others. This is partially due to a general love of technology and an ability to learn new things fairly quickly. And, as it turns out, it's also due to 40 years of experience figuring out how to best live with their neurodivergent brain. When encountering any new software tool, mobile app, etc., Shanna's first instinct is to quickly and thoroughly review every single menu option in detail. This is one way to learn a new technology, but it is also a way to account for the apparently idiosyncratic needs that some neurodivergent brains require. In this case: if a software doesn't "look" a certain way, they could become too distracted to be productive. If notifications are not carefully calibrated, interruptions that are a brief distraction for some could cause a complete loss of focus and attention, and it might take days to recover. Certain apps that don't provide such flexibility are sometimes simply unusable, or they must be strictly quarantined to specific parts of the day or workflow in order to minimize disruptions. What colleagues see: someone who is very comfortable with technology and good at helping navigate every possible Zoom setting. What it actually is: a carefully calibrated user experience that feels time-consuming, inflexible, and harder than it somehow should be.

THE STATUS QUO

While there has recently been greater awareness of initiatives like "Sensory Storytime" and other ways to better serve neurodivergent library patrons—particularly children—there remains a paucity of literature studying impacts of neurotypical work environments on neurodivergent library workers. One of the authors (Shanna) also serves on the editorial board for DisLIS, a library and information sciences journal that aims to center the disability experience within library work, and this area of research is undoubtedly growing. Still, the world of disability is as vast and diverse as humanity itself, and the experiences of neurodivergent folks differ accordingly. This means that one or two journals or a book here and there will not be enough to represent us. The more library workers who are willing to speak up, share their stories, and advocate for their needs, the more accommodating our profession can truly be.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Once we received our diagnoses, Cindi at 49 and Shanna at 39, we began to understand ourselves and our surroundings more fully and to understand how to adapt our work environments to mitigate difficulties. Working at home or in a completely quiet space with controllable lighting was

a huge help. Scheduling conversations in the form of meetings with clear roles and expectations was, too. Advocating for ourselves and team members with accommodations greatly helped. Managing upward by asking for clarification of our own work expectations and those of our teams helped but was sometimes met with mixed success, ironically due to issues stemming from our own neurodivergence. Giving "granular enough" guidance without micromanaging is a narrow tightrope to walk. Below are specific action items that any organization can use to create a friendlier, more empathetic, and inclusive environment for neurodivergent workers. As is generally the case with accessibility initiatives, a rising tide lifts all boats.

The Physical Environment

Clear expectations for work environments are crucial, particularly for open spaces. It's important to know how to handle phone calls, meetings and conversations, computer and other noises, and personal space, etc.

People with neurodivergent traits often require tailored work environments that address distractions and sensory issues. Obvious considerations include temperature, noise, and lighting, but some individuals may also require ambient noise (either more, or less), avoidance of bright colors or patterns, flexible workspaces and seating, or space that effectively accommodates "idiosyncratic" work styles. (Piles? Cleared desk? Copiously detailed, Post-It-note-based task lists? Curated tchotchke collection? Multiple fidget items? Yes, please, and maybe more!)

Assistive technologies can also help create a productive environment. Consider offering headphones, white noise machines, technical support for adjusting computer settings, and ergonomic equipment such as trackballs, highly adjustable chairs, or mechanical keyboards.

The Working Environment

Everyone deserves meaningful work and to understand the impact they have on their organization. Setting expectations and parameters for a productive working environment for neurodivergent workers is imperative to our success.

It may seem obvious, but explicit deadlines and tasks are helpful; this often means back-and-forth until the appropriate level of clarity is reached. Restating what you're hearing and encouraging fine-grained questions or reflection time can be helpful. Many neurodivergent workers flourish in environments that encourage and appreciate work done on one's own. Consistent feedback ensuring that work is on the right track is helpful.

These things also apply to performance reviews. Clear goals, an environment that welcomes questions, and course corrections ensure success. Informal feedback should be given as often as is welcome and needed.

The Social Environment

Meetings are inescapable in any work environment, and an inclusive environment is crucial to neurodivergent workers' success here as well. Share an agenda beforehand that includes specific topics and who is responsible for them, the roles that people play, and time limits, where possible.

Include clear expectations for behavior in the meeting invitation, including how to contribute or ask questions, whether comfort breaks are encouraged, and how to address temperature, lighting, or noise issues.

Welcome accommodations without comment: people may bring headphones or earplugs, sunglasses, fidget items, or have an occasional need to move around, stretch, or stand.

If appropriate, consider sharing a photo of the venue, facility and area maps, and clear instructions for parking.

Follow-ups to meetings are also important. Make a list of assigned action items and their deadlines before meeting's end, share minutes as quickly as is practicable, and provide a mechanism for follow-on feedback.

A NOTE ON MANAGING OTHERS

Much of what is mentioned above can be used effectively by neurodivergent library workers who manage people. We have adjusted work environments, sought fine clarity for tasks and deadlines, normalized physical accommodations, and run efficient meetings with follow-up documentation.

In addition, the tendency to be an acute and intense observer of others in social situations means that we can have a better understanding of why people behave the way they do. This can be especially helpful when working with colleagues who accomplish tasks in a way that is very different from what we or others would expect. When a colleague is complaining, "This person isn't doing things the way that I told them to!" we can help separate feelings from desired outcomes: is it more important that this task be accomplished in a specific manner, or is it more important that the task be completed, regardless of how it is done?

CONCLUSION

We have found library workplaces and colleagues to be largely empathetic, and accessibility, of course, is integral to our mission. Empathy and accessibility on behalf of library workers is just as important as it is for patrons. Autism and ADHD also exist without diagnosis, and there is still a stigma against getting one, especially as an adult in the workforce. Being aware of how to serve neurodivergent people will improve working conditions, with or without diagnosis.

We welcome your feedback on this piece! What has worked in your library, or for yourself, as a library worker? Please feel free to submit comments, either as a letter to the editor or directly to the authors. Our email addresses are below.

AUTHOR BIOS

Cindi Trainor Blyberg (cindi@blyberg.net) is a retired librarian whose current special interests include U2, reading queer books, knitting socks, and most recently, urban homesteading. They live in Lexington, Kentucky with their spouse and two dogs.

Shanna Hollich (shollich@gmail.com) is a long-time librarian who now works for a library-adjacent nonprofit. Current hyperfixations include jigsaw puzzles, cross-stitch, and reading (always reading). Their interests are varied, but you can usually find them reading or writing about disability justice, copyright, open access, and the philosophy of librarianship.

NOTE

[1] Thanks to ITAL Assistant Editor, Joanna DiPasquale, and Cindi for reminding Shanna of this point and finding some relevant links to include here.