

NEURODIVERSITY MANAGEMENT AS AN ELEMENT OF ESG – CASE STUDY ANALYSIS

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Abstract: The main aim of this paper is to juxtapose two management perspectives that have become increasingly popular since the beginning of the 20th century: ESG and neurodiversity management. The practice of the environmental, social and governance (ESG) principle was formally proposed in 2004, fitting perfectly the call for sustainable development of the global economy and society. The notion of neurodiversity as the diversity of human brains and minds was created in 1998, obviously having a much longer history as the concept had been defined in other ways previously. Currently, in the light of shrinking human resources in the labor market, there seems to be greater willingness in organizations to employ neurodiverse people, although such organizations are still scarce. Polish companies had the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge of ESG by voluntarily participating in a contest for the best Polish employer, announced in 2022 by one of the leading Polish newspapers. The results of the competition constitute the perfect research material for this paper since the issue of neurodiversity management appeared within one contest category, namely: *For the implementation of ESG solutions*, which allows the classification of neurodiversity management as an element of ESG. Case study analysis was applied as the main method to obtain the research results. Two organizations participating in the contest – EY and BNP Paribas Bank Polska – were examined more closely as cases relevant for this study.

Keywords: case study analysis, ESG, neurodiversity, neurodiversity management

JEL Classification: M53, M54, O35

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Introduction

Neurodiversity, as a relatively newly recognized natural diversity in human cognition, is slowly gaining a management perspective, which might be partly owing to the growing number of people diagnosed with neurodiverse conditions such as autism (Tomczak, 2022), which in turn leads to an increasing number of neurodivergent individuals accessing the labor market and being in need of support in their professional well-being. What is more, with an aging population and a contracting labor force, neurodivergent human capital might be of critical importance despite the challenges related to neurodiversity management such as the need to adapt recruitment, onboarding and retention practices to neurodivergent brains and minds. Apart from the challenges, there are also opportunities as the inclusion of neurodivergent individuals in the job market enables modern organizations to increase their productivity, innovation and competitiveness due to the out-of-the-box thinking inherent in diverse teams combining neurodiverse and neurotypical human capital. Furthermore, the demands of the ESG perspective, especially within its social factor, call for workplace health and safety, diversity, equality, opportunity, as well as fight against discrimination and poverty, which hopefully contribute to opening up career paths for neurodivergent human resources. Hence, the observed close relationship between neurodiversity management and ESG is the subject of investigation in this research paper.

Thus, the study objective is to demonstrate that neurodiversity management has actually become an element of ESG, which is achieved by applying case study analysis.

The literature review section delves deep into the theoretical background revealing the nature of neurodiversity and the ESG principle in order to juxtapose the two and examine how they correlate.

The research methodology section covers the area of case study analysis as the main method used in this research paper.

The results section analyzes the applications for the 2022 contest organized by one of the leading Polish newspapers to vote for the best Polish employer. The participants' reports constitute perfect research material for the case study analysis, the outcome of which is also included in the results section.

Finally, the conclusion section contains a summary of the achieved research results, along with the observed limitations and proposed perspectives for future research.

Literature review

The ESG principle was introduced in 2004 to try to harness the results of the speeding development of the economy and society, posing both opportunities and challenges, which is the case of the current reality as well. It was created in response to the increasingly severe sustainable development problems in the environment, society and the financial market, additionally approved by international organizations and countries worldwide as a sustainable development action plan with the aim to build a sustainable and comprehensive development framework of human society.

Thus, ESG can be defined as a framework system including environmental (E), social (S), and governance (G) factors (Li et al., 2021). The environmental factors comprise greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions, energy consumption and efficiency, air pollutants, water usage and recycling, waste production and management, biodiversity, innovation in environmentally friendly products and services, to mention just a few. Within the social dimension the following factors might be classified: workforce freedom and association, child labor, forced and compulsory labor, workplace and customer health and safety, discrimination, diversity and equality, opportunity, poverty and community impact, supply chain management, training and education, customer privacy and a variety of other community impacts. The governance factors are related to codes of conduct and business principles, accountability, transparency and disclosure, executive pay, board diversity and structure, bribery and corruption, stakeholder engagement and shareholder rights among others (Li et al., 2021).

However, all the above factors not only help to measure the sustainability and social impact on business activities, but also play an extremely important role in the process of investment analysis and decision making as they are used to evaluate corporate behavior and future financial performance. According to another definition, ESG factors are ESG matters that may have a positive or negative impact on the financial performance or solvency of an entity, sovereign or individual (EBA, 2021). Thus, the ESG factors may highly influence firm value and some research results demonstrate that firms coping with ESG negative events experience a low but significant drop in their market value (Capelle-Blancard & Petit, 2019), which proves that organizations simply cannot afford to ignore ESG, even more so as a growing number of them are being evaluated by entities known as sustainability rating agencies (SRAs) (Busch et al., 2016; Dremptic et al., 2020) and the ratings they produce are mainly designed to provide stakeholders with data on various ESG indicators (Clementino & Perkins, 2021). ESG ratings are used by investment firms, bond-rating agencies, and others to help evaluate how well an organization manages risks by protecting the environment and supporting stakeholders, including investors, customers, employees, and the community in which it operates (Conway, 2023).

Summing up, ESG might be viewed as an investment philosophy pursuing long-term value growth and a concrete, down-to-earth governance method, while the ratings might be of considerable strategic significance to firms, most notably by influencing how key audiences perceive, value and engage with them (Martins, 2005). Investors also increasingly use ESG data to govern the ethical and sustainability behavior of firms in which they invest (Amel-Zadeh & Serafeim, 2018; van Duuren et al., 2016). The ESG principle belongs to one of the key management issues of the modern world and it has been actively practiced in Europe, America, as well as other developed countries since its formal proposal in 2004; moreover, it is gradually becoming mainstream (Edmans, 2023). As compared to older terms, such as corporate social responsibility (CSR) or sustainability, ESG takes a broader view. CSR often associated 'doing the right thing' with higher costs, whereas ESG ratings emphasize how addressing social and environmental issues improves an organization's long-term viability and resiliency (Conway, 2023). Sustainability, in turn, is often viewed

as a mainly environmental issue, whereas ESG includes the sustainability of the organization itself, its ability to function, and that of the ecosystem in which it operates (Conway, 2023).

In this research paper the focus is on the social (S) aspects of ESG as they comprise widely perceived workplace issues and neurodiversity management is mostly related to the hiring, and retention of neurodiverse (ND) individuals, in addition to their workplace well-being. Unfortunately, not many ND individuals find employment. Thus, the social factors seem to be neglected, mostly the aforementioned ones: discrimination, diversity and equality, opportunity, poverty and community impact, since it is the individuals whom companies hire and promote that affects social inequality and inclusion (Edmans, 2023). One of the reasons for this negligence might be the lack of awareness and knowledge in the field of neurodiversity and neurodiversity management among potential employers and employees as well. From a historical perspective, this is actually not surprising as the term ‘neurodiversity’ is relatively new since it was only first coined by the Australian sociologist Judith Singer in 1998 (Singer, 1998) in her study on autism to refer to the natural diversity of human minds. All of us have different brains that work in different ways, and neurodiversity refers to all of the unique and differing ways in which people can exist, think, process information, feel and act. Within that, there are neurotypical people, whose functioning falls within societal standards and norms, and neurodivergent people, whose functioning falls outside of those norms (Middleton, 2023, p. 25). Neurodiversity encompasses a spectrum of conditions, including autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia and dyspraxia. Some estimations suggest that up to 20% of the population might have a neurodivergent condition (Honeybourne, 2019). Admittedly, concepts such as the autism spectrum and neurodiversity were proposed before by the Austrian psychiatrist Hans Asperger during his first lecture on autism in 1938 (Silberman, 2020, p. 23), but until the 1990s they were understood based on medical discourses of disability (Richards et al., 2019), probably owing to their medical origin. The milestone achieved by Judith Singer was the creation of a term referring to the diversity in human cognition as a natural phenomenon, a variation in the human brain regarding learning, sociability, mood, attention, and other mental functions in a non-pathological sense (Rothstein, 2012), which shifted the societal understanding of neurocognitive conditions from medical deficits to individual variations (Khan et al., 2023).

The alteration from a negative medical perspective, both stigmatizing and disabling, to a non-pathological one, slightly opened up a path of social opportunities for neurodivergent individuals parallel to recognition in practitioner forums about the benefits associated with neurodiversity, triggering recruitment drives to hire neurodivergent individuals (Khan et al., 2023). The emerging strengths-based approach to mental disorders (Wiklund et al., 2020) and neurodiversity (Wiklund et al., 2018), where a focus is placed on a person’s assets as opposed to weaknesses, also provides the potential to include neurodiverse conditions within the management of diversity in organizations (Richards et al., 2019). Nonetheless, still the ignorance of the social (S) ESG factor expresses itself in the exclusion of neurodivergent employees from work opportunities and employment. The newest data from Great Britain shows that only 22% of

autistic people are in any sort of paid employment, even though research by the National Autistic Society suggests that 77% of those who are unemployed state that they want to work (Middleton, 2023, p. 235). In Poland the situation is even more dramatic, as the employment rate of people with autism is only 2% (Polish Economic Institute, JiM Foundation, 2022, p. 4), and its value is also the lowest when compared to the corresponding rate among all people with disabilities in our country (Wiater, 2023).

The exclusion might be the aftermath of certain neurodivergent personality traits constituting the following challenges in the workplace: problems with effective communication, time management, task prioritizing and work organization, as well as problems with stress management, emotion control and sensory sensitivity (Tomczak, 2022). On the other hand, highly functioning neurodivergent individuals often possess unique abilities akin to human superpowers that are likely to make them excel in professional settings (Austin & Pisano, 2017), for example, above-average analytical thinking and attention to details, innovative thinking and the extraordinary ability to multitask, to mention just a few.

Fortunately, it has recently been observed that scholars and organizations have increasingly recognized the inclusion of neurodivergent individuals as a significant aspect of fostering diversity within the modern workplace (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023) and a source of human capital that can be utilized for competitive advantage (Szulc, 2021). Hopefully, this is also the case with two organizations, EY and BNP Paribas Bank Polska, which took part in the 2022 contest and reported their neurodiversity management practices within the ESG category.

Research methodology

The main research aim of this paper is to demonstrate how and why neurodiversity management can be treated as an element of ESG. Consequently, case study analysis was chosen as the main method to achieve the research objective. The nature of the analyzed available data is inherently descriptive and exactly for this reason the qualitative approach in the form of a case study was adopted.

Case study is a research methodology, typically seen in social and life sciences (Heale & Twycross, 2018). A variety of definitions of case study research exists, however, for the needs of this paper, the following ones might be adopted:

1. case study research can be defined as an intensive study about a person, a group of people or a unit, which is aimed to generalize over several units (Gustafsson, 2017).
2. a case study is an intensive, systematic investigation of a single individual, group, community or some other unit in which the researcher examines in-depth data relating to several variables (Woods & Calanzaro, 1980).
3. case studies are examinations of complex phenomena in the natural setting aimed at increasing the understanding of them (Hamel, 1993).

It is recommended to choose entities as cases because cases are rather special (Stake, 2006), whereas functions and general activities lack specificity and organic character to be maximally useful for case study (Stake, 2005). As the first objective is to understand the case and discover how it gets things done, it needs to be viewed in terms of its functioning and activities (Stake, 2006).

The entities examined in this research paper within the framework of case study analysis are two organizations operating in the Polish labor market and apparently caring for neurodiversity management. They represent two different branches: banking (BNP Paribas Bank Polska) and consulting (EY). Both of them participated in the contest announced in 2022 by one of the leading Polish newspapers with the aim to vote for the best Polish employer. The results of the competition were made available in 2023. The participants were evaluated within the following five categories:

- Category 1: For working mode and working time solutions in the post-COVID-19 era – for creative solutions that draw on the experience of the pandemic and allow the potential of workers to be harnessed under new working mode rules.
- Category 2: For achievements in the area of employment – for maintaining or even increasing employment in extremely difficult business conditions, for introducing flexible and effective solutions in this area.
- Category 3: For dialogue with employees – for introducing or developing new forms of effective communication with employees, for achievements in effective dialogue with the workforce.
- Category 4: For the best remuneration solutions – for solutions that compensate employees for the reduction in the value of their income due to inflation.
- Category 5 (ESG Category): For the implementation of ESG solutions – for employee engagement in sustainability processes, for transparent policies on employee communication.

The aforementioned entities selected for this research paper were investigated thoroughly within Category 5 as this is the only category related to ESG in the discussed contest. Precisely, neurodiversity solutions were mentioned in the following two out of five subcategories within Category 5:

- Employee involvement in sustainability processes.
- Other non-standard arrangements for staff.

Results

There were 75 companies altogether which decided to participate in the competition. The layout of the represented industrial branches is shown in Table 1.

Out of the 75 analyzed companies, only 7 demonstrated awareness of neurodiversity or autism issues in the context of organizational management within two subcategories of Category 5 (ESG Category), as shown in Table 2. In total, there were 12 companies caring for disabilities in the workplace, but it was not specified whether these disabilities comprise neurodiversity or not.

The data collected in Table 2 indicates that two industrial branches: banking and consulting, lead the way in the realm of knowledge and awareness of neurodiversity issues in the organizational context. Nevertheless, only 2 out of 7 companies from Table 2 seem to be experienced in neurodiversity management as only these two provided quite extensive reports of their functioning and activities in this field offering solutions classified as ESG or listed as non-standard arrangements for staff, still under the ESG Category. The branches they belong to are shown in Table 3.

Table 1. Number of companies representing particular industrial sectors

Name of industrial branch	Number of companies representing each branch
domestic appliances, recruitment, chemical, logistics, furniture manufacturer, plastics, databases, electrical, board games, training, automotive, marketing consulting, health care, shop equipment, wholesaler, clothing, education, law firm, real estate, energy, garden accessories, cosmetics, hygiene products	1
packaging, beer, consulting, fuel, debt collection, telecommunications, trade	2
industry, IT	3
insurance	5
construction, food	6
banking	7
transport	8

Source: Author's own compilation based on research

Table 2. Number of companies with awareness of neurodiversity or autism issues

Subcategory within Category 5 (ESG Category)	Number of companies demonstrating awareness of: neurodiversity, autism, ADHD, dyslexia	Industrial branch
Employee involvement in sustainability processes	4	banking (2), consulting (1), construction (1)
Other non-standard arrangements for staff	3	banking (1), consulting (1), clothing (1)

Source: Author's own compilation based on research

Table 3. Number of companies demonstrating advanced neurodiversity management solutions

Name of company (branch)	Number of employees	Subcategory within Category 5 (ESG Category)
BNP Paribas Bank Polska (banking)	8,037	other non-standard arrangements for staff
EY Polska (consulting)	4,000	other non-standard arrangements for staff

Source: Author's own compilation based on research

The main reason for which the companies from Table 3 were selected for the examination within the framework of the case study analysis in this research paper is that they both show pride in their ESG achievements, boasting about the implemented

neurodiversity solutions in their reports, which are considerably more expanded for Category 5 (ESG Category) than the reports of the other organizations competing in the contest.

BNP Paribas Bank Polska reports the implementation of numerous awareness-raising initiatives in the area of neurodiversity management. Firstly, the organization launched neurodiversity awareness campaign ‘Inne spojrzenie na inne spojrzenie’ (‘A different look at a different view’) and awareness webinars in cooperation with the AsperIT Foundation, which is a Polish foundation supporting neurodivergent individuals. Moreover, the organization’s readiness to work with neuroatypical individuals was audited, also in cooperation with AsperIT, and the post-audit recommendations were duly implemented. Another ESG solution is a grassroots staff initiative, which was set up with people on the autism spectrum and with ADHD in order to develop a guide for managers on good practice in working with neuroatypical people. In 2022 the company also invited its employees to a series of meetings, webinars and workshops on working with neurodivergent individuals.

EY Polska, representing a multinational company from the consulting branch, does not lag behind with their initiatives to assist neurodiverse human resources. The company has created a Neurodiversity Center of Excellence (NCoE) in response to the challenges of the transition era comprising both their global and Polish experiences in this field. In accordance with the mission of the company, which is Building a Better Functioning World, EY Polska can boast a pro-neurodiversity approach proposing numerous innovative solutions. With the appreciation of the potential of neurodiverse individuals on one hand, and the company’s capacity and readiness to enter a new area on the other hand, the company decided to pursue their neurodiversity management goals in the local market by means of launching a pilot program for the professional activation of neurodiverse people. The organization looks first and foremost at talent, at the above average abilities that potential neurodiverse employees may have in terms of analysis, precision or creative problem-solving, particularly skills such as pattern recognition and mathematical ability. The company is aware that by providing neurodiverse people with the right working and development conditions, it gives these individuals a chance to get their dream job.

The IT industry is definitely one where people on the autism spectrum can use their strengths. Having this in mind, EY launched an unusual project with the aim to employ 5 neurodiverse people in the company’s Cyber security of Poland team, which was possible due to several factors such as the demand for talent with above-average abilities, openness to innovation and thinking out of the box. EY is willing to recognize the potential of neurodiverse individuals who definitely bring a new perspective to the team with the abilities they possess and can also excel in the world of numbers and data. The implementation of the project was facilitated by clients who have already had projects to employ neurodiverse individuals and appreciate the potential of this group of people. A multidisciplinary project team was working together with the AsperIT Foundation, which has experience in activating neurodiverse individuals. What is more, the key issues were the awareness of the need for changes in recruitment, onboarding and retention in the workplace in addition to the preparation of both the organization itself as well as the Cyber security team, a part of which the candidates

have become. Following the success of the first edition, the company launched the second edition of their neurodiversity career activation program, which included new working areas such as Audit and Risk Management. They admitted having plans to recruit, train and deploy further neurodiverse talent by April 2024.

Conclusions

Neurodiversity and ESG are relatively new notions as both were created within the last 25 years, which is not a long period for science. Neurodiversity celebrates and values the diversity of human minds and brains, whereas ESG recognizes the need for sustainability in the fast developing modern world. The organizations examined in this research paper within the case study analysis framework can be praised for their ability to discover a link between neurodiversity and ESG by incorporating their neurodiversity management practices into the ESG solutions. The social aspect of ESG is clearly respected by the analyzed organizations by means of their neurodiversity awareness. The openness to hire neurodiverse human capital definitely supports social ESG factors such as workplace health and safety, discrimination, diversity and equality, opportunity, poverty and community impact, training and education. Admittedly, only 2 out of the 75 companies under consideration demonstrated awareness in the area, but still neurodiversity management is slowly becoming an element of ESG.

The main limitation of this study might be the nature of case studies themselves as they have historically been stereotyped as a weak sibling among social science methods (Yin, 1994) with quantitative methods held in higher esteem. On the other hand, quantitative methods also have their own limitations as they are only able to assess that a change has occurred over time but cannot say how or why (Cassell & Symon, 1994, p. 5). Moreover, qualitative data can always be complemented with quantitative data assembled by means of other relevant methods.

In the light of successful neurodiversity management positively influencing social aspects of the modern world, the suggested direction for further research would be an attempt to find and examine other organizations, either in Poland or globally, with experience in the area of neurodiversity management in order to train and educate more employers so that human capital is not squandered, all the more so that the way it is managed is vital for organizational success (Davenport & Prusak, 1998).

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ZARZADZANIE NEURORÓŻNORODNOŚCIĄ JAKO ELEMENT ESG – STUDIUM PRZYPADKU

Streszczenie: Głównym celem niniejszego artykułu jest zestawienie dwóch perspektyw zarządzania, które stają się coraz bardziej popularne od początku XX wieku: ESG i zarządzania neuro różnorodnością. Praktyka sprawozdawczości zrównoważonego rozwoju uwzględniająca czynniki zarządzania środowiskowego, społecznego i wewnątrzorganizacyjnego (ESG) została formalnie zaproponowana w 2004 roku, doskonale wpisując się w wezwanie do zrównoważonego rozwoju globalnej gospodarki i społeczeństwa. Pojęcie neuro różnorodności jako różnorodności ludzkich mózgow i umysłów powstało w 1998 roku, mając oczywiście znacznie dłuższą historię, ponieważ koncepcja ta była już wcześniej definiowana na inne sposoby. Obecnie, w świetle kurczących się zasobów ludzkich na rynku pracy, wydaje się, że w organizacjach istnieje większa gotowość do zatrudniania osób neuro różnorodnych, choć takich organizacji wciąż jest niewiele. Polskie firmy miały szansę wykazać się wiedzą z zakresu ESG poprzez dobrowolny udział w konkursie na najlepszego polskiego pracodawcę ogłoszonym w 2022 roku przez jeden z czołowych polskich dzienników. Wyniki konkursu stanowią doskonały materiał badawczy dla niniejszego opracowania, gdyż zagadnienie zarządzania neuro różnorodnością pojawiło się w ramach jednej kategorii konkursowej, tj. Za wdrażanie rozwiązań ESG, co pozwala zaklasyfikować zarządzanie neuro różnorodnością jako element ESG. Analiza studium przypadku została zastosowana jako główna metoda uzyskania wyników badań. Dwie organizacje biorące udział w konkursie – EY i BNP Paribas Bank Polska – zostały dokładnie przeanalizowane jako przypadki istotne dla niniejszego badania.

Słowa kluczowe: studium przypadku, ESG, neuro różnorodność, zarządzanie neuro różnorodnością

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