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**The contribution of neurodiversity networks to  
the creation of inclusive workplaces for  
neurodivergent employees**

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To be transparent about the research I performed: I used Chat GPT to translate and phrase. A professional reviewed the final concept on spelling, grammar, sentence structure and word usage in this thesis. The feedback was first self-assessed before being adopted into the final version.

Thank you for taking the time to read my thesis!

Madelief van Will

## **Summary**

Neurodiversity is an upcoming topic within the diversity management literature, with diversity networks as one of the management practices. Diversity management practices can contribute to the development of inclusion within an organisation. The aim of my research is to get insights into the way neurodiversity networks contribute to the development of inclusive workplaces for neurodivergent employees. I conducted interviews with board and non-board members of the different networks, I attended lunch sessions to observe and analysed documents. My findings are that the neurodiversity networks that I researched, want to contribute to the development of inclusive, righteous and safe working environments for neurodivergent employees and contribute to the vision and goals of the organisation. Multiple principles and activities of the networks have the potential to contribute to an inclusive work environment, however, to do so, the network should encourage and guard that changes are made on a strategic level within the organisation.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

In recent years, diversity management and practices have been increasingly studied in the management literature (Jammaers, 2022; Yadav & Lenka, 2020a, 2020b). One type of diversity management practice is diversity networks (Dennissen et al., 2019; Dennissen et al., 2020). The goal of diversity networks is, according to Benschop et al. (2015) and Kaplan et al. (2009), to foster inclusive work environments and facilitate the development of employees with different social identities within the organisation. According to Dennissen et al. (2019), diversity networks can contribute to organisational equality at three different levels: individual, group and organisational. These networks contribute to career development at the individual level, community building at the group level and inclusion at the organisational level (Dennissen et al., 2019). According to Dennissen et al. (2019), diversity networks should challenge systemic inequalities and demand substantial change in organisational practices and processes to contribute as much as possible to the creation of equality within the organisation.

Diversity and inclusion are two strongly correlated concepts, but they are not the same (Roberson, 2006). Roberson (2006) conducted research on how human resource and diversity officers of large organisations define diversity and inclusion. The researcher found that diversity involves the “heterogeneity and the demographic composition of groups or organizations” , while inclusion concerns “employee involvement and the integration of diversity into organizational systems and processes” (Roberson, 2006, p. 228). Thus, organisations can hire diverse group of employees and become more diverse; however, having a diverse group of employees does not ensure the achievement of inclusion.

One of the dimensions of organisational diversity and inclusion that has gained prominence in the existing literature over the last few years is neurodiversity (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023; Walkowiak, 2023). Neurodiversity constitutes the diversity in human brains and includes, for example, autism, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD(H)D) and dyslexia (Armstrong, 2010; Baker, 2011; Doyle, 2020). As diversity in human brains exists, people may experience stigmatisation when they are evaluated negatively and viewed as different from the norm (Kurzban & Leary, 2001; Major & O’Brien, 2005). Volpone et al. (2022) stated that to create an inclusive climate within the organisation, negative attitudes and behaviours, such as stigmatisation, must be eliminated. With this statement, Roberson’s (2006) definition of inclusion fit: “inclusion focuses on the removal of obstacles to the full participation and

contribution of employees in organizations” (p. 217). This study focuses on creating inclusion in organisations for neurodiverse employees.

This study uses critical disability studies in carrying out the research. In the existing literature, there are dichotomies in models in approaching disabilities, for example, the social model and the medical model. With regard to the social model, Shakespeare (2013) mentioned that the ideal of the social model is a barrier-free utopia, a world in which all obstacles people face are removed. For example, people with learning difficulties might not have to read and write (Shakespeare, 2013). However, not having to read or write can hinder full participation (Shakespeare, 2013). On the other hand, according to Dwyer (2022) the medical model approaches neurodiversity in the form of disorders, deficits and diseases. Criticism from cultural studies, feminists and postmodernists critiques such binary thinking on disability, paving the road to critical disability studies (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Critical disability studies advances a more nuanced perspective on disability, in which, according to Waldschmidt (2017), disabilities are a situation, event, experience, process or discourse. In this study, neurodiversity is considered as a contemporary complexity in which both the individual and the social aspects are included.

Doyle (2020) estimated the population to be composed of neurodiverse individuals at 15–25%, which makes neurodiversity a significant minority. However, there is limited research on neurodiversity in organisational studies (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023). This research, focus on diversity networks as a diversity management practice. Hennekam and Follmer (2024) searched the internet for organisational practices, programs and policies which included neurodiversity practices and programs, until saturation was reached. One of the practices they found was neurodiversity networks. Hennekam and Follmer (2024) stated that diversity networks “can create a culture of inclusion” (p. 7). However, the researchers did not explain how neurodiversity networks contribute to fostering inclusive cultures. Therefore, there is a gap in the literature regarding how neurodiversity networks contribute to the creation of inclusive workplaces.

In practice, organisations state that they want to create and/or raise awareness of neurodiversity with neurodiversity networks (Brunton, 2022; Deloitte, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; KPMG, n.d.; NN Group, 2022; SER Diversiteit in Bedrijf, 2022). By researching the contribution of neurodiversity networks to inclusion, organisations can gain a better understanding of the relevance of their practices. To make a contribution to both literature as neurodiversity networks, the aim of this research is to gain insights into how neurodiversity networks contribute to the creation of an

inclusive workplace for neurodivergent employees. Therefore, the following research question is constructed: How do neurodiversity networks contribute to the creation of inclusive workplaces for neurodivergent employees?

The outline of this thesis is as follows: Chapter 2 provides a literature review on neurodiversity, diversity networks, and disability networks. In Chapter 3, the methodology used for collecting empirical research is clarified. In Chapter 4, the findings are presented. In Chapter 5, the theoretical contribution of this research is discussed, along with the limitations of the research, implications for future research, practical implications and finally a conclusion is drawn.

## Chapter 2 Theoretical background

As neurodiversity networks constitute a particular type of diversity network, in this chapter, the current literature on diversity networks and their possible contributions to organisations are reviewed. First, this chapter elaborates on how neurodiversity is seen in this study. Furthermore, the focus is on diversity networks and how these networks can contribute to the creation of inclusion in organisations. Moreover, disability networks are addressed, focusing on the activities of disability networks. Finally, a conclusion is presented, including sensitising concepts, to have insights into the required empirical data.

### 2.1 Critical Disability Studies

As mentioned in the introduction, critical disability studies does not follow a dichotomy in the models through which disabilities can be approached. Within the literature, one way to approach disabilities is through the distinction between the medical model, an individualised or medical phenomenon, and the social model, a social construction or phenomenon (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Waldschmidt, 2017). First, the medical model regards neurodiversity in terms of health conditions, such as a mental illness, a disease or brain injuries caused by an accident (Baker, 2011; Doyle, 2020). Baker (2011) and Doyle (2020) included developmental disabilities such as autism, ADHD and dyslexia in the medical model as well. However, according to Doyle (2020), people with a mental illness can return to being neurotypical, and brain injuries can either be resolved as the injury heals or worsen as health deteriorates.

On the other hand, Dwyer (2022) regarded the social model as the strong social model, which involves society imposing barriers for disabled people, which, in turn, causes disabilities. In other words, the strong social model states that disability is caused by barriers imposed by society (Dwyer, 2022). However, the strong model ignores the individual characteristics of people, according to Dwyer (2022). Instead, Dwyer (2022) stated that the neurodiversity approach should be applied. The neurodiversity approach indicates that disabilities are the product of the interaction between individual characteristics and the environment (Dwyer, 2022). This approach aligns with the idea of critical disability studies, which prefers to adopt an approach between the medical model and the social model.

As mentioned in the introduction, this study adopts Roberson's (2006) definition of inclusion. Roberson's (2006) definition is chosen over, for example, the definition by Shore et al. (2011). According to Shore et al. (2011), inclusion occurs when people experience both a sense of

belonging and feelings of being valued for their unique characteristics. However, as mentioned in the introduction, diversity networks should call for substantial change in organisational practices and processes (Dennissen et al., 2019). Because networks should focus on change to achieve inclusion, Roberson's (2006) definition for inclusion is chosen, as it involves: "inclusion focuses on the removal of obstacles to the full participation and contribution of employees in organizations" (p. 217). Shore et al.'s (2011) approach to inclusion is included in this research by focusing on the obstacles that prevent individuals from experiencing a sense of feeling belonging and being valued for the uniqueness.

The obstacles faced by neurodivergent employees are categorised as individual and environment dependent in this study. As neurodiversity is the diversity in human brains, including autism, AD(H)D, Tourette syndrome and dyslexia (Armstrong, 2010; Baker, 2011; Doyle, 2020), it is likely that not every neurodivergent employee experiences the same obstacles. Defending this statement, even within the autism spectrum, van den Bosch et al. (2018) found broad differences among eight interviewees. Based on these findings, van den Bosch et al. (2018) stated, "as a result, when supporting people with autism, there cannot be a "one size fits all" approach" (p. 471). In this research, the approach of critical disability studies is used, in which a disability is considered the product of the interaction between the individual and the environment.

## 2.2 Diversity networks

Diversity networks involve groups of voluntary employees within the same organisation who share a common goal, a common identity (gender, sexuality, race or ethnicity) or similar circumstances (life phase or disabilities) in which employees differ from the norm (Beaver, 2023; Douglas, 2008; Schlachter et al., 2024, Sloatman, 2022). In the literature, diversity networks are referred to in different ways, including caucuses, employee resource groups (ERGs), employee networks, employee forums, affinity groups, affinity networks, employee councils and business resource groups (Beaver, 2023; Douglas, 2008; Githens & Aragon, 2009; Schlachter et al., 2024; Sloatman, 2022; Welbourne et al., 2017). This research uses the term 'diversity networks'.

What diversity networks contribute depends on their goals and activities. According to the three-level framework of organisational equality by Dennissen et al. (2019), diversity networks can contribute to minority group employees within organisations on three levels (Figure 1). The first is the individual level; diversity networks can contribute to individuals' career development

by providing useful tools (Dennissen et al., 2019). For example, Bierema (2005) found women’s in-companies networks that are formed to help women build skills and to create knowledge on how to succeed in the organisational culture. The function of these networks is to organise networking events, create mentoring programmes and advise senior management (Bierema, 2005).

The second is the group level, where diversity networks can contribute to community building by bringing network members together (Dennissen et al., 2019). Bringing members together can help reduce the feelings of isolation within the organisation and increase the feelings of being welcomed and being engaged in the organisation (Dennissen et al., 2019; Schlachter et al., 2024). This idea fits with the definition of Shore et al. (2011), in which people need to feel belonged and valued for their unique characteristics. Thus, networks operating at group level focus on creating a sense of belonging and valuing the uniqueness of employees in order to facilitate community building.

**Figure 1**  
*Three-level framework of organisational equality.*



*Note. Adopted from Dennissen et al., 2019, p. 969*

The framework proposed by Dennissen et al. (2019) indicates that only diversity networks operating at the organisational level can contribute to the creation of inclusion. The organisation needs to change rather than individuals, as stated by Doyle and McDowall (2022). Organisational change can be generated by diversity networks by challenging systemic inequalities and contributing to changing organisational policies and practices that (re)produce the inequalities (Dennissen et al., 2019). An example cited by Schlachter et al. (2024) is that discussions within the diversity network, in collaboration with the HR department, resulted in the implementation of policy changes. Furthermore, according to Schlachter et al. (2024), a combination of voluntary work and top management support is required for the network to thrive. This support may be in the form of time, as the respondents in Schlachter et al. (2024) stated that they suffer from a lack of time to invest in diversity networks. However, as suggested by Schlachter et al. (2024), to foster a growth and expansion of diversity networks, there is a

need to obtain mutual benefit for both employees and employers. Thus, to create inclusion, changes at the organisational level, with mutual benefits for both employees and employers, are required.

## 2.3 Disability networks

According to Dennissen et al. (2019), one of the key goals of diversity networks is to enhance the visibility and awareness of the capabilities of disabled employees within the organisation. In the following section, the process of increasing visibility is discussed, followed by reducing stigmatisation and, finally, raising awareness.

### 2.3.1 *Increasing visibility*

According to Dennissen et al. (2019), board members seek to increase the visibility of their network by, for example, including disabled employees in organisational sports tournaments. However, the board members of the disability network researched by Dennissen et al. (2019) mentioned being careful not to create a particular visibility of the network. One way to do so is, according to Dennissen et al. (2019), by replacing the discourse of “disability” by “ability” (Dennissen et al., 2019). Dwyer (2022) addressed the terminology used by researchers on neurodiversity as well. Terminology can contain “subjective negative value judgements”, which can harm neurodivergent people (Dwyer, 2022, p. 85). Instead, neutral descriptive terminology needs to be used (Dwyer, 2022). Thus, while increasing the visibility of the network, board members should take into account the manner in which the visibility will be increased, for example, by using neutral descriptive terminology.

Moreover, a tension over who should be involved in the network can be found in the literature. Dennissen et al. (2019) showed that the disability network is open to not only disabled employees but also able-bodied employees. Beaver (2023), who researched LGBT networks, found that when organisational leaders are involved, legitimacy is brought to the network and visibility is increased. On the other hand, Dennissen et al. (2019), mentioned that board members fear that the visibility of differences may be constructed as inequality, disadvantages or stigma if the network is only open to members of a specific social identity group. Moreover, Dennissen et al. (2019) shared that the network offers a space where disabled employees can provide support by meeting up and discussing their experiences and struggles. A respondent in Beaver’s (2023) study shared that some of the sexual minority employees thought that when allies became involved, there would be no place specifically dedicated to LGBT employees

anymore. Thus, increasing the visibility of the network may be achieved by involving allies, but this inclusion can come at the expense of the network's provision of support.

### *2.3.2 Reducing stigmatisation*

As mentioned above, the board members fear stigma, among others, when the visibility of disabilities within the organisation increases (Dennissen et al., 2019). According to Kurzban and Leary (2001) and Major and O'Brien (2005), stigmatisation occurs when people are negatively evaluated and seen as different from the norm. Johnson and Joshi (2016) mentioned how, in the case of high-functioning autism spectrum disorders (ASD), behaviours<sup>1</sup> are sometimes viewed as controllable, "he's just throwing a fit to get what he wants") (p. 445). On the other hand, Johnson and Joshi (2016) mentioned that ASD is sometimes trivialised, "everyone has issues" (p. 445). With stigmatisation, individuals within a group are generalised: "people may see themselves as different from other members of their group, but view others as similar to each other" (Ali et al., 2024, p. 247). The manner in which people are generalised, evaluated and the degree of deviance from the norm depend on the nature of the relationship and context, considering that stigma is a social phenomenon (Andersen et al., 2022; Major & O'Brien, 2005). Thus, the manner in which people are stigmatised is depending on the context.

Although the findings by Heijnders and van der Meij (2006) are related to health conditions, the findings provide insight into how stigmatisation can be reduced at the organisational level. According to Heijnders and van der Meij (2006), reducing stigma for health conditions, such as mental illnesses, can occur at different levels, including intrapersonal, organisational and governmental. At organisational level, stigma can be reduced by using training programs and (new) policies as interventions (Heijnders & van der Meij, 2006). According to Siyam'kela (2003), awareness-raising workshops should be conducted to "unpacking underlying assumptions and beliefs that are closely linked to HIV/AIDS stigma" (p. 13). Thus, at organisational level, training programs and (new) policies as interventions, such as awareness-raising workshops, can be conducted to reduce a stigma.

### *2.3.3 Raising awareness*

As previously stated, in addition to enhancing visibility, disability networks also aim to create awareness (Dennissen et al., 2019). According to Dennissen et al. (2019), disability networks

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<sup>1</sup> Since Johnson and Joshi (2016) used the term "mental disorders" in their study, the researchers took most likely a medical perspective. Due to the approach of critical disability studies and the use of neutral terminology, the term "behaviours" was used instead of "symptoms" as employed by Johnson and Joshi (2016).

“construct their network as a center of expertise on disability issues, providing the organization with opportunities to learn how disabled people are able to contribute, focusing on strengths and qualities instead of deficiencies” (p. 977). The inclusion of words such as ‘centre of expertise’ and ‘providing opportunities to learn’ indicate that disability networks are the centre of knowledge of and information within the organisation. Specifically, according to Ali et al. (2024), neurodiversity awareness “refers to employee perceptions regarding organizational neurodiversity, based on available information and previous knowledge” (p. 245). According to Ali et al. (2024), employees may not be fully aware of the extent of neurodiversity within the organisation, as neurodiversity is often invisible. Moreover, Ali et al. (2024) found that supervisors had a higher level of awareness of neurodiversity than employees, which the researchers explained by citing previous research showing that supervisors receive more training and have more access to information on employees.

## 2.4 Conclusion

From literature review, it appears that research on disability networks is limited. However, some insights have been gathered into what disabilities seek to contribute to and in which manner. To research neurodiversity networks, based on the findings of the literature review, sensitising concepts are developed to provide direction in the data collection in this study.

Neurodiversity in this research is regarded as the product of the interactions between individual characteristics and the environment (Dwyer, 2022). To gather insights on the obstacles neurodivergent employees experience, the individual characteristics and the environmental characteristics are determined through the data collection process. Accordingly, the following sensitising concepts are constructed: *individual characteristics* and *environmental characteristics*.

Furthermore, diversity networks can contribute at three different levels (Dennissen et al., 2019). By gathering insights on the goals of the network, insights can be gathered into which level the organisation contributes to. Additionally, the activities of the network, for example, increasing visibility, reducing stigmatisation and raising awareness, should be assessed to create insights into which level the neurodiversity networks contribute to (Dennissen et al., 2019). Accordingly, the following sensitising concepts are constructed: *goals* and *activities*.

Moreover, in the literature, a tension is found between the idea of involving allies in the network and the idea of not involving them (Beaver, 2023; Dennissen et al., 2019). To gather insights into whether the network should involve allies, insights are needed on the membership of the

network. Additionally, Schlachter et al. (2024) mentioned that diversity networks should receive support from top management, for example, in terms of resources or time, for the network to thrive. Accordingly, the following sensitising concepts are constructed: *membership* and *receiving support*.

## Chapter 3 Methodology

In this chapter, a description is provided on how the empirical part of the research has been conducted. First, the chosen epistemology is discussed to present insights into what knowledge means in the context of this research and the perspective on knowledge that has been taken. Furthermore, the research design and, subsequently, the data collection are described. Next, the way in which the empirical data has been analysed is presented. Finally, a methodical reflection and ethical considerations are included.

### 3.1 Epistemology

As this research adopted the approach of critical disability studies, both individual and environmental characteristics needed to be considered (Dwyer, 2022; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). In this way, individual characteristics cannot be separated from their context. As the manner in which neurodiversity is perceived depends on different factors, such as society and culture, a radical nominalism ontology was employed in this research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). The epistemology of this research involved value-mediated findings, as the beliefs and values of the researchers may have influenced both the data collection, through the decision of which follow-up questions to ask, and the data analysis, though the assignment of greater significance to certain findings over others (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). By linking epistemology and ontology, a critical theory research paradigm was conducted in this research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

### 3.2 Research design

To examine how neurodiversity networks contribute to the creation of inclusive work environments for neurodiverse employees, a qualitative research strategy was adopted. As the goals and activities of the network are interrelated and influence each other, a complex social phenomenon was researched, and a qualitative research approach was deemed more suitable than a quantitative approach (Eisenhardt & Graebner, 2007). Moreover, by carrying out qualitative research, insights were generated on what the networks do their natural context, including the explanation of why certain activities were conducted (Bleijenbergh, 2016; Myers, 2020). A multiple case study was done in this research, as a set of events – actions and activities of the network– could be studied in its natural context (Saunders et al., 2019). This research was done within two networks.

The choice of two cases is based on the expectations from both cases. Case 1, Neurodiversity Network A, was in the restarting phase, and Case 2, Neurodiversity Network B, was in the

starting phase. As both cases were (re)starting and had not organised many activities in the past months before this research started, both cases were included in order to gather sufficient empirical data for deriving insights on what neurodiversity networks do. The decision to select two cases instead of three or more was driven by the available resources, ensuring sufficient depth in the data collection and analysis to develop a high-quality theory (Gustafsson, 2017). To maintain focus on neurodiversity networks specifically, other networks, which, for example, included neurodiversity within the disability network, were excluded from this research.

As seen in Chapter 2, there are previous studies in the literature on how diversity networks contribute to the creation of inclusion in the workplace. However, the theory founded is not explicit on neurodiversity networks, which lead this research to delve further into neurodiversity networks (Myers, 2020). Similar to Chapter 2, no clear expectations of what will be found in the empirical data are formulated; hence, a deductive reasoning approach was not suitable for this research (Bleijenbergh, 2016). However, the sensitising concepts from Chapter 2 are partly guiding the data collection, as there are already insights on how diversity networks can contribute to inclusion. Accordingly, inductive reasoning, in which there are as few expectations as possible, did not fit this research either (Bleijenbergh, 2016). A combination of both approaches, abductive reasoning, which includes both theory and empirical data, was deemed the most suitable.

### 3.3 Data collection

The data was collected with the use of three different qualitative data collection methods – interviewing, observing and collecting documents – to gather insights into what the members of the network think and experience and what the network does (Bleijenbergh, 2016; Meyers, 2020). Through the use of three different data collection methods, a triangulation of research methods was achieved (Myers, 2020; Shenton, 2004), which improved the credibility of this research (Shenton, 2004). The two cases within this research are called Neurodiversity Network A and Neurodiversity Network B. To increase the transformability of this research, a case description is given for both cases. Furthermore, each data collection method is discussed.

#### 3.3.1 Case description

First, Neurodiversity Network A is restarting. A former board member left and passed on the responsibility of acting as a board member of the network to two members. However, no mission, vision or strategy was formally written on paper. During the period in which the two members had the responsibility passed over to them, the network was at a standstill. To avoid

the end of the network, Respondent BA1 became a part of the board. At the time of this research, the network’s board consisted of two members.

Neurodiversity Network B was at an early phase during the research. The network was developed from a bottom-up approach, with the network being put on the agenda by an employee who became aware of neurodiversity through a presentation about diversity, including neurodiversity, during a seminar organised by a recruitment agency. The first activity organised – a keynote by an expert on the topic of neurodiversity during a knowledge market (an online knowledge day for IT colleagues) – in beginning 2024 was regarded as the kick-start of the network. At the time of this research, Neurodiversity Network A was solely focused on the IT department within the organisation. At the beginning of the research, the core team (the board of Neurodiversity Network B) was composed of nine members and grew to a team of eleven core members by the end of the research. At the end of the research, however, it was determined that participation in the network is voluntary, but not without obligation. Additionally, it was determined that every member must ask permission from their manager to allocate time to the network. In Table 1, further information about both networks is provided, including the sector of the company, budget and other diversity networks in the organisation.

**Table 1**  
*Overview cases*

	Sector	Number board members	Number non-board members	Phase network	Other diversity networks within the organisation	Budget	Formal mission, vision, strategy document
Neurodiversity Network A	Finance	2	130	Restarting	Disability, LGBT, Cultural diversity, Young	€7500 per diversity network	No
Neurodiversity Network B	Energy	11	None, open network	Starting	Women, Young,	Budget available on request	Under development, partly finished in final stage of research

**3.3.2 Interviews**

Semi-structured interviews were conducted. Conducting semi-structured interviews should have established consistency across interviews while leaving room for follow-up questions (Myer, 2020). However, the consistency among the interviews was not completely maintained, as the interviewer responded to the responses of the respondent, which guided the conversations. Consequently, the consistency is limited, which also impacts the dependability of this research

on this aspect. While carrying out the interviews, the interviewer was aware of not needing to direct the interviewees in a certain direction by formulating open-ended and natural questions (Bleijenbergh, 2016). There were two groups of respondents: board members and non-board members.

This research involved board members, as it was expected that the board members would provide insights into the goals of the networks, the activities that has been and would be organised, the membership of the network and the support that would be received. Non-board members were initially involved in the network for their perspectives on the activities and the obstacles neurodivergent employees experience. However, during the first interview with a respondent of Neurodiversity Network A, it became known that the network had been down for an extended period, and the respondent could tell little about what the network does. As the researcher already knew that Neurodiversity Network B was in the beginning phase and not many activities had been conducted, it was decided to shift the focus of the interviews to why the network was needed according to the non-board members. Accordingly, more insights could be created on the obstacles neurodivergent employees experience.

Two interview guides were created, one for board members and one for non-board members (Appendix 2). Both interview guides had an English and a Dutch version. The interview guide for the board members was inspired by the interview guide of Dennissen (2020). However, some questions were changed to make them open-ended and to have them fit with the sensitising concepts of this research. The general questions were related to *individual* and *environmental characteristics*. The questions about network membership, structure and goals were related to *membership* and *goals*. The questions about *activities* were related to activities and the network in the organisation in relation to the *receiving support*. The interview guide for non-board members included only questions related to the sensitising concepts of the *individual* and *environmental characteristics* and *activities* of the network.

In total, three interviews were conducted with board members, all in Dutch, and nine interviews were held with non-board members, eight in Dutch and one in English. Of the respondents, the demographic distribution was two women and ten men, all of whom were white. One respondent was from another Western country, besides the Netherlands. Due to confidentiality and anonymity, these data are not linked to specific respondents (Appendix 1). The location of the interview was based on the preferences of the respondents. In total, 11 interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and two were held offline at the offices of the respondents. All the interviews were recorded and saved via Microsoft Teams, fitting with the guidelines of

Research Data Management of the Institute for Management Research (IMR) (Nijmegen School of Management, n.d.). The respondents were selected based on their availability, as in the case of the board members of Neurodiversity Network A. The two board members of Neurodiversity Network B interviewed were selected by the contact person of that network based on their involvement in initiatives and their job within the organisation. The non-board members as respondents were partly selected on an open request for participation via the contact person and partly selected at direct request by the contact persons.

### *3.3.3 Observations*

Two observations were conducted: one was a lunch meeting with an open invitation for all the employees of the IT department, and the other was a lunch meeting with the core team, both for Neurodiversity Network B. An observation for Neurodiversity Network A was not possible, as no activities or meetings were scheduled during the research period. The decision to conduct observation was based on other studies on diversity networks that have carried out observation as well (Bierema 2005). Although the goal of this observation differed from this research, it showed that conducting an observation is possible in this research field.

The researcher was physically involved in the lunch sessions without taking part in the activities in the same way as attendees did (Saunders et al., 2019). However, the identity of the researcher and the purpose of the research were known to the attendees. By not participating in the activities while being physically involved and being clear about the purpose of the observation, the researcher conducted the observation as an observer and participant (Saunders et al., 2019).

As few insights were gained from both literature review and interviews on activities of diversity networks, a semi-structured observation was carried out. To give direction during observations, goals were created regarding what should be found. Moreover, the sensitizing concepts of the theoretical framework were used as key concepts in the observation guide (Appendix 3) (Bleijenbergh, 2016). During the observations, notes were taken in a separate notebook, focusing on what was said, what was done and the environment the lunch sessions were held. During the first observation, little attention was paid to the timing of the events. However, during the second observation, more emphasis was placed on noting the timing, with each transition to a new topic or event being accompanied by a timestamp.

### *3.3.4 Documents*

Finally, documents were gathered related to the goals of the network, the activities organised, invitations for planned activities and contact with allies (Appendix 4). These documents were

either sent by the contact persons of the networks or collected from the webpages of both organisations. With the use of the documents, it was analysed what the network wants to achieve and in what manner. Moreover, the documents provided the possibility to cross-check the findings of the interviews and observations (Myers, 2020). Together with the interviews and observations, data was collected from what was stated (documents), what was said (people by interviewing) and what was done (social interactions by observing).

### 3.4 Data analysis

To analyse the data collected from the interviews, the interviews were transcribed, and for the observations, field notes were developed. Transcribing the interviews and creating field notes improved the dependability and confirmability of this research, as it can be control whether the findings corresponded to the answers of the respondents and what had happened during the observation. The content analysis took an inductive approach, in which the transcriptions, field notes and documents were first coded in ATLAS.ti, using open codes resembling as close as possible to the raw data (Bleijenbergh, 2016). The open coding was done for Neurodiversity Network A and Neurodiversity Network B separately, to keep the data as close to the context as possible. The first documents of Neurodiversity Network B were received and coded before the interviews. When all the documents, interviews, and observations were coded, for both networks, the total number was over 1300. To reduce the number of codes, the researcher went back to the documents to remove irrelevant codes. By going back and forward while coding, coding became an iterative process.

As the number of codes was still high, before creating the axial codes, an overview of all codes had to be created. For this reason, an intermediate step was taken. The codes with almost the same definition were put in a folder in ATLAS.ti together. These folders were used as open codes, turning into axial codes, based on patterns found between the folders (Bleijenbergh, 2016). Finally, the patterns between the axial codes were found, which created the selective codes (Bleijenbergh, 2016). The selective codes were adjusted during the writing of Chapter 4. The code boom with all the selective codes, axial codes and examples of open codes can be found in Appendix 5. All quotes used from the interviews conducted in Dutch have been translated into English, keeping the translation as close to the original as possible .

### 3.5 Ethical and reflection

The researcher was conscious of the responsibility to save and use this data in a responsible manner. It was shared with the respondents that the data would be managed according to the guidelines of Research Data Management of the IMR by including a link to the website in the invitation sent to the contact persons (Nijmegen School of Management, n.d.). Prior to the interview recording, each respondent was asked for their consent to record the interview and informed of the intended use of the recording. During the interviews, the respondents were given the choice to share their neurodiversity status to maintain a confidential atmosphere. Additionally, disclosure of neurodiversity status was not required for using the data in this study.

Furthermore, before conducting any observations, it was announced that a researcher was present to observe. The objectives of the observation as well as the fact that all information was confidential and would be anonymised to protect the privacy of the respondent were shared. After the recording was stopped, the researcher shared with the respondents that the recordings would be deleted no later than the researcher's receipt of their diploma. However, it was announced that the anonymised transcripts would be kept. Since the respondents work in the same organisations, extra attention was paid to pseudonyms and the anonymising of the quotes and data provided in this study. All the respondents were also given the option of receiving the transcript; one respondent requested the transcript, which was sent to them.

As the ontology in this research is radical nominalism, subjectivity exists, and the view of neurodiversity and inclusion of the researcher can have an influence on conducting the interviews, making the field notes and carrying out the analysis. The researcher is familiar with neurodiversity, particularly with dyslexia in her family. Since none of the interviewed respondents indicated being dyslexic, the respondent's prior knowledge and perspectives on neurodiversity likely had minimal impact on this research. Memos were tracked after the interviews and during the transcription and coding processes. Using these memos, the researcher reflected on their own actions – for example, on asking guiding questions during the interviews. By reflecting on the interviews conducted, the researcher could learn from the mistakes made and keeping them in mind while interpreting the data. Moreover, the researcher decided not to interview the contact person of Neurodiversity Network B, as the researcher had already conducted a two-way conversation in which, for example, Neurodiversity Pride Day was brought up while the contact person was not aware of the existence of this day. However, in retrospect, the contact person could have been interviewed anyway, since, from a radical nominalist

perspective, subjectivity is not preventable. As long as the experience was reflected on, it could have been used.

## Chapter 4 Findings

In this chapter, the findings of this study are described. The first findings concern the reason of existence of the networks. The next findings pertain to the goals of the networks and what activities are and will be conducted by the networks. Moreover, the reasons for taking up membership in the networks are included. Finally, some obstacles that neurodivergent employees experience are described, including a link with the activities of the networks, to consider if the activities fit with the experiences of the obstacles.

### 4.1 Reason of existence networks

According to Respondent BA1, diversity networks are established for marginalised groups, such as neurodiversity. Respondent BA1 wants to have a place where neurodiverse employees can go “*when all else fails*” (interview BA1). The network can, according to Respondent BA1, contribute to creating an environment in which employees can collaborate in an organic and successful manner by bringing attention to the differences between people. At the same time, the neurodiversity network fits, according to Respondent BA1, within the pillars of where the organisation stands for, is related to a sustainable (work) environment. Being sustainable can, according to Respondent BA1, lie in “*the periphery of the norm*” (interview BA1). Thus, Respondent BA1 aims for Neurodiversity Network A to be a place within the organisation for neurodiversity as a marginalised group and at the same time to contribute to the vision of the organisation.

According to Respondent BB2, the organisation of Neurodiversity Network B has put diversity and inclusion on the agenda and stands for “*we take care off our people*” (interview BB2). The goal of the organisation is, according to Respondent BB2, to create a pleasant work environment, where everyone can be themselves. It is reflected in the reason why the network exists as well:

*‘We believe that an inclusive, fair and safe environment for neurodivergent colleagues contributes to the mission & vision of [organisation B]’* (Document Why).

As seen in the quote, Neurodiversity Network B wants to contribute to the vision of the organisation, similar to Neurodiversity Network A. However, Respondent BB1 takes a step further, explaining why the network exists for the benefit of the organisation. According to Respondent BB1, the network has a facilitating role in, first of all, increasing efficiency by

empowering employees such that they can do their work better. Moreover, according to Respondent BB1, the network can facilitate the reduction of turnover in the organisation by creating more commitment and better working conditions.

Thus, the networks want to contribute to the individual employees and to the organisation. As described in Chapter 2 and suggested by Schlachter et al. (2024), networks should create mutual benefits for employees and employers to grow and expand its outcomes.

## 4.2 Goals and activities

This section discusses how the networks want to contribute in terms of their goals and activities. First, raising awareness is discussed, followed by providing a safe space and, finally, including neurodivergent perspectives in organisational practices.

### 4.2.1 Raising awareness about neurodiversity

Both Neurodiversity Network A and Neurodiversity Network B want to raise awareness about neurodiversity among colleagues and managers. According to Respondent BB1, people need to become more aware of the differences between people. According to Respondent BB2, it should be allowed for everyone to be different, with different brains, ways of thinking and perspectives. To create awareness about differences, Neurodiversity Network B wants to adopt a knowledge perspective by inviting experts. The activities will be open to all colleagues or “*subset for specific talks*” (Document Why). The keynote by an expert on the topic of neurodiversity during the knowledge market made the colleagues think and talk about neurodiversity:

*‘And on the other hand, I also did notice that afterwards I heard um a lot of people talking about it that you do like this, yes, so no, hey yo, people are thinking about this, you know’* (interview B1).

However, to maintain awareness, networks need to actively organise activities:

*‘However because it is been, I do not know how many months ago, it has subsided and it is business as usual. Um it is just more that refreshing more that repeating’* (interview B1).

As described in Chapter 2, neurodiversity awareness, according to Ali et al. (2024), is the perception of employees towards neurodiversity based on previous knowledge and available

information. Thus, if the network provides knowledge and information about neurodiversity, the perception of employees regarding neurodiversity in the organisation may change.

One way Respondent BA1 wants to raise awareness is by organising a Loesje workshop (interview BA1). Loesje is an organisation that develops posters with positive and critical texts, which are shared on social media platforms and can be found on the streets, with the goal of making an impact (Loesje, n.d.). Besides organising a workshop for community members, as the network members were called by Respondent BA1, Neurodiversity Network A planned a walk-in version for colleagues who are not member. With the version for non members, Respondent BA1 wants to create awareness of neurodiversity within the organisation.

Besides organising an activity, an invitation for the activity may contribute to raising awareness as well. In 2021, Neurodiversity Network A organised an online masterclass about neurodiversity at the work floor. In the invitation, the following was mentioned:

*‘For whom? For any neurodiverse colleague/manager/HR etc and for anyone with a neurodiverse colleague. Do you not have a colleague with Autism/Giftedness/AD(H)D/Dyslexia etc? Are you actually sure?’* (Document Invitation Online Masterclass).

As the quote shows, not only neurodiverse employees and employees with neurodivergent colleagues were approached and invited but also employees who do not if they have neurodiverse colleagues were approached. In this way, people were stimulated to think about neurodiversity among their colleagues. Even if they did not attend the masterclass, awareness about neurodiversity may have already been raised.

Moreover, both networks provide information about neurodiversity via an internal page. Neurodiversity Network A provides information about different forms of neurodiversity via an information page on SharePoint. Neurodiversity Network B provides information about the network, for example, about the calendar with planned activities and summaries of the organised activities, as well as useful links, such as the keynote of the expert from earlier in the year, and focus points for colleagues and managers regarding the manner in which neurodiversity should be taken into account:

*‘Organisation and policy, management, events, learning and development, communication, performance and talent management, recruitment, the way we work, well-being, culture’*  
(Document Confluence Page).

In the quote is seen that focus points are focused on a wide range of functions and departments, including management and HR. As the pages are open to all colleagues, they may contribute to increasing awareness of neurodiversity within the organisation. However, before raising awareness, the visibility of neurodiversity and the network should be increased, according to Respondent BA1:

*‘In my experience, people who are not part of diversity networks are usually not as aware yet that there are diversity networks’* (interview BA1).

That colleagues who are not part of the diversity network are not aware of its existence, can be seen in how the respondents learnt about the network: *“accidentally found”* (Interview A1) and *“then it turned out that there was a network inside [the organisation]”* (Interview A2). These quotes show that members of the network did not know about the existence of the network before joining it. Moreover, respondents within the organisation of Neurodiversity Network B indicated that awareness about the existence of the network is low. If the colleagues do not know about the existence of the network, it is likely that they do not know about the activities organised either.

Respondent BA1 wants to create visibility for neurodiversity and the network by sharing news items by the network on the intranet and preferably via Engage: *“basically Facebook, for work”* (interview BA1), which makes the news less fleeting on the intranet due to the possibility of interaction. Cross-references in the news items with other diversity networks may, according to Respondent BA1, increase the visibility of the network as well. Finally, according to Respondent BA1, members can be seen as ambassadors of the network, in which members tell colleagues about the activities. Neurodiversity Network B shares about the sessions by emailing all colleagues of the IT department. However, according to Respondent B4:

*'If you would mention something in such a meeting, then everyone is physical together on the work floor. Then a manager is standing there um telling what we will do the next three months. If you would say something like that to also have attention for this. Then you have everyone's attention. But then must um they must find it important enough to say that there'* (interview B4).

This quote as well as the others mentioned above are examples of communication media. Friedl and Verčič (2011) separated traditional internal communication media, such as emails, face-to-face communication and employee meetings, from social internal communication media, such as blogs, social networking and instant messenger. Thus, (board)members want to increase the visibility of neurodiversity and the network through internal communication. This approach differs from increasing the visibility of disabled employees, as found by Dennissen et al. (2019), in which disabled colleagues are visible at organisational events. An explanation for this difference may be that neurodiversity is often an invisible diversity (Shields & Beversdorf, 2020). Thus, the increasing visibility of neurodiversity may be due to internal communication.

Moreover, Neurodiversity Network B wants to increase the visibility of the strengths of the employees: *"bring focus to the strengths of the neurodivergent members of our community"* (Document Why). One way to do so is based on the outcome of a brainstorming session with leadership:

*'We acknowledge that the environment in which we work demands a critical mindset. Nevertheless, some situations require us to look at them through a different lens. Let's strive and remind each other to focus more on the possibilities of our colleagues and engage in conversations with empathy'* (Document Confluence Page).

This quote shows that the network wants to remind colleagues to focus more on the possibilities. This aligns with Dwyer's (2022) statement that the diversity of minds and brains should be valued. Moreover, the network wants to increase the acceptance of neurodiversity in the company. According to Robertson and Ne'eman's (2008) in research on autistic college students, their gifts talents, and abilities should be embraced, and their individuality and autonomy, among other aspects, should be acknowledged and respected to foster acceptance. Thus, focusing on the possibilities may contribute to fostering acceptance.

Thus, one of the goals of the networks is to raise awareness, which may be accomplished in different ways, including by providing knowledge and information and by organising activities. However, at the same time, the networks should focus on increasing their own visibility such that employees can be informed about the activities organised, which Neurodiversity Network A wants to do through internal communication. Lastly, Neurodiversity Network B want to foster acceptance and strive to focus on the strengths of neurodivergent colleagues.

#### *4.2.2 Providing a safe space*

Another goal of the networks is to create a safe space for neurodivergent employees. According to Respondent BA1, the network is needed for colleagues who have difficulties expressing their feelings and is a place where these colleagues are heard and feel understood, a place for “*when all else fails*” (interview BA1). Moreover, Neurodiversity Network B wants to create a safe environment for neurodivergent employees:

*‘Give people a safe feeling, I think, that they that they can share their experiences, that there is a place and space for that within [organisation B]’* (interview BB2).

Thus, both networks want to have a place where employees can go to share their experiences. Respondent B4 claimed to not know how many team members are neurodiverse, as many colleagues had not expressed their neurodiversity (or neurotypicality), apart for some colleagues with ADHD. During the observation of the lunch session of the core team, a core team member observed that if somebody does not want to disclose their diagnosis, it means that there is still a stigma attached to the diagnosis. Respondent A5 shared:

*‘But within the team it also just did not feel safe to report it. And because of that, I did not’* (interview A5).

As evident from this quote, not every employee feels safe disclosing their diagnosis. As neurodiversity is often an invisible diversity (Shields & Beversdorf, 2020), people need to decide on whether to disclose it or not (Clair et al., 2005). Reasons for not disclosing are related to stigmatisation, discrimination and fear of negative attitudes such as judgements, misunderstandings and fear of being perceived as attention-seeking (Frost et al., 2019; Lindsay et al., 2021; McIntosh et al., 2023). However, Respondent B2 regards not wanting to disclose as something broader:

*'That has a lot more to do with just that piece. That has to do with safety anyway. That that goes beyond just that part'* (interview B2).

As seen from the quote, employees need to feel safe to be able to disclose. McIntosh et al. (2023) found that when people experience psychological safety at work, they are more likely to disclose their ADHD diagnosis. Some respondents of McIntosh et al. (2023) shared that colleagues disclosing their neurodiversity or mental health struggles as well as the feeling of having understanding and open-minded colleagues prompted their disclosure. A respondent who did not feel safe had not disclosed but was instead using coping skills to achieve the goals and accomplish what needed to be done (McIntosh et al., 2023). Thus, psychological safety can play a role in deciding to disclose one's neurodiversity.

A tension exists between the idea of creating a safe place and the decision of who is allowed to attend certain activities or join the network. Neurodiversity Network B does have informal themed sessions with like-minded people:

*'Where people can share ideas on how to handle the topic of the session and become more aware of the strengths'* (Document Why).

This goal of the activities was formulated after a discussion at the lunch session of the core team:

*'It was discussed that you would not want to include people who have no interest in neurodiversity, as this could potentially harm a sense of safety'* (Observation 2).

*'It also talked briefly about vulnerability and safety and not daring to express everywhere. Also that people should not be excluded, but make sure the atmosphere remains safe by being vulnerable and open'* (Observation 2).

The quotes show that safety is an important aspect that should be ensured, but the network does not want to exclude non-neurodiverse employees either. Neurodiversity Network B has chosen to make the like-minded meet-ups open to all neurodiverse people and those who are interested. According to Respondent A4, a neurodiversity network should focus on doing things together,

where “one may excel in A, while the other may excel in B”, and prevent “us-them thinking” (interview A4). Us-versus-them thinking is a different way of defining ingroup-versus-outgroup thinking, with ingroups (us) being seen as virtuous and the outgroups (them) being perceived as the opposite (Kinder & Kam, 2010). Moreover, Respondent A4 experienced a barrier when becoming part of the network, which involves becoming a member of the community page on Microsoft by sending an email:

*‘But then you become, say, a member of. I was like, yes member of? Yes but then you have [unclear], do you then get a label, yes or no? ... Is of course not like that. But that is how that felt a little bit. Like okay. I do now start admitting myself for a certain group, with a certain, well, certain scope. Once you are in it, you hear a little bit, from colleagues with children on the spectrum. ... There are colleagues who are just curious. Oh, okay. But more that expression to the outside I do um do think is important’* (interview A4).

From the quote, it is apparent that Respondent A4 experienced difficulties in becoming a part of the network, as joining felt like disclosing one’s neurodiversity. According to Respondent A4, the network should express outwardly that the network is open to everyone. On the other hand, respondent B3 shared:

*‘I think having the community itself is already valuable in itself. Because you have that community and, You you sort of ehm are able to ehm meet and chat with similar ehm. Yeah, people, people who I think are are for me, I tend to communicate a lot easier with other people who have ADHD’* (interview B3).

The quote shows that the value of the network lies in the opportunity to meet like-minded people. Thus, a paradox exists for neurodiversity networks in terms of the membership of the network and participation in activities such as like-minded meet-ups.

The community page of Neurodiversity Network A requires that board members to post messages, but colleagues are encouraged to post as well, for example, when facing problems, so that colleagues can get help from co-colleagues next to the board members. Moreover, members have also shared talks and articles with one another – for example, about how ADHD

in women often goes unnoticed. Additionally, questions have been asked by new members. Besides sharing articles and questions, there is also a head with humour, where people share jokes with one another: “Sigmund jokes or I do not know what” (interview A1). Neurodiversity Network B organises like-minded meet-ups instead. An example was the open lunch session (Observation 1) in which different topics were discussed and some attendees actively participated while others listened more. At the beginning of the session, it was stressed that everything told in the meet-up was and should remain confidential.

During the lunch session of the core team, following a discussion on who may be involved in the like-minded meet-ups, there was a discussion on the content of the meet-ups:

*‘The discussion was partly about the content of the meeting, where people could tell their experience, or whether something would also be done with the topics discussed. Whereas [contact person] had the idea of the session being more of a place where people could vent, another core team member indicated whether the sessions would stay alive if there was no feedback or nothing would be done with it’ (Observation 2).*

The discussion about the content of the meet-ups was partly based on the feedback that one of the core team members had received from the attendees of the open lunch session:

*‘There were questions like what happens to it? And now? Some felt it was of little use. The question was raised, especially towards [contact person], why there has to be so much insistence that nothing is done with what was told. Then it feels fake, and it is not sure whether they will come again if nothing is done with it anyway. It was construed from [contact person] that something concrete should come out for neurodiverse people and are much more result-oriented than neurotypical people. For neurotypical people, just a conversation also has value, but not for neurodiverse people. She therefore construed that it was drafted by a neurotypical person, while neurodiverse people have a different perspective on it’ (Observation 2).*

As the quote shows, some neurodiverse colleagues expressed their want to see the results of what had been told. After the lunch session of the core team, two board members came together to create the vision, mission and strategy of the network. The goal of the session, as formulated by the contact person, was the following:

*‘Informal gatherings to foster recognition and creating a supportive culture within the company’* (Document Why).

The goal changed to the following:

*‘Informal, themed session that where people can share ideas on how to handle the topic of the sessions and become more aware of strengths’* (Document Why).

In this way, a shift has been created from a creating supportive culture where recognition is fostered to sharing ideas on how to handle specific topics and becoming aware of strengths. During the interview, Respondent B2 shared the following with respect to the contribution of the networks:

*‘... because, if you report problems, you do not necessarily have to be the owner of the problem to solve it. But it is something of indicating and seeing how you can help and think along to make those plannings days better for everyone’* (interview B2).

Thus, according to Respondent B2, employees can help search for solutions, but they do not have to be the ones to solve the problem. In this sense, during the like-minded meet-ups, neurodiverse employees can share their ideas on how to handle a topic. However, the neurodiverse employees should have to solve the problems themselves.

Both networks want to create a place where neurodiverse employees can find safety. However, tensions can be experienced with regard to who should be involved in certain meet-ups and who should join the network. Moreover, sharing experiences is not sufficient for neurodivergent members; they would like to see that something will happen with what they share.

### 4.2.3 Including neurodivergent perspectives

Although the network wants to be a safe place for neurodiverse employees if something goes wrong, Respondent BA mentioned:

*'But actually, you want to do something before that'* (interview BA1).

This quote shows that the network wants to prevent things from going wrong. Respondent BB1 wants to inventory the bottlenecks and problems that neurodiverse employees experience. According to Respondent BB1, first, there should be listened to what can be changed to make things easier and better for employees before time and resources are invested. Neurodiversity Network B has used different ways of gathering input on the obstacles that neurodiverse employees experience – for example, a walk-in session and a survey.

Moreover, Neurodiversity Network B wants to organise formal sessions in which management and HR can gather *'more insights from a neurodiverse perspective on a specific topic'* (Document Why). In these sessions, both neurodiverse employees and employees from HR and/or management can discuss what can be improved from a neurodiverse perspective. The network has already conducted three sessions, which can be scaled to formal sessions: *Neurodiversity and Leadership*, *Neurodiversity and HR* and *Vacancy Text and Neurodiversity Brainstorm* (Document Confluence Page). Outcomes of the brainstorm *Vacancy Text and Neurodiversity Brainstorm* were, for example, adding photos and videos of the atmosphere and texts for dyslexic readers (Document Confluence Page). In the summary of the session, it was also indicated that some points could be discussed with someone within the organisation. Respondent BB2 shared the following:

*'Or um that is all in the beginning stage. So, I am not saying that the vacancy text has already been updated. But there came. It was actually more exchanging experiences. Like oh does that work, is that how it works for you guys. Or, do you like this? So, it was actually more a start to see what is, what is, what is out there in terms of needs, that is how you should see it'* (interview BB2).

As evident from the quote, the brainstorm session about vacancies was used to obtain insights into the needs of neurodiverse colleagues. However, what is being and will be done with the

insights remains unclear. Within the organisation of Neurodiversity Network A, an example has been found in which input from neurodiverse perspectives was considered. In one of the offices, relaxation and/or silence or low-stimulus rooms were to be created, for which input from neurodivergent employees was gathered via the network. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Schlachter et al. (2024) found that discussions of diversity networks in collaboration with, for example, the HR department can result in policy changes. However, if only spoken about, awareness will be created, as described by Respondent BB2, but no action will be undertaken, and policies and practices will not change.

Lastly, both networks have different allies involved. Both networks have contact with different specialists from HR, including a colleague of inclusion, diversity, and equity who manages the budget of Neurodiversity Network B. A specialist was also involved in the open lunch session of Observation 1. Besides, Neurodiversity Network A is in contact with other diversity networks within the organisation. Once or twice a year, the board members of the diversity networks meet, with the chair of the executive board and group director of HR also attending. Neurodiversity Network B has also had contact with the department focused on the way of working within the organisation, with someone from strategy and with a director of IT who was involved in the open lunch session as well. Other parties that Neurodiversity Network B wants to become involved with are the HR director, a colleague from communication, the work council and the board. Beaver (2023) found that, according to respondents, legitimacy, visibility, acceptance of sexual minority employees, power and support were provided by allies joining the network. Thus, by including allies, other goals of the network, such as visibility and acceptance, might be achieved.

## 4.2 Motivations for membership

Becoming a member of Neurodiversity Network B requires being involved in the community page of the network on Microsoft Teams (interview BA1). There are different reasons for which the respondents from both networks became involved: getting informed about what the organisation does for neurodivergent employees, sharing experiences, hearing others' experiences, brainstorming on possible improvements in the organisation and seeking advice on how to handle problems:

*‘Yes, I am curious how other, uh, people who have difficulty coming to the office are dealt with in other departments. Um. Whether it is handled differently than with me. And if so, how. Then I can benefit from that’* (interview A3).

*‘Um I guess just getting some more information, right? Also of of of what is going on within the company. Of what, what the company eh do for for for people with for example autism eh and what yes? Just getting some information’* (interview A1).

*‘That is actually, main reason that I became a member. I think like, okay, I can share experiences. That might help other people again to overcome the barriers I faced for a long time’* (interview A4).

As seen in the reasons for being involved and from the quotes, these reasons are mainly related to learning from and helping others. The ability to ask questions and share experiences on the community page of Neurodiversity Network A and during the like-minded meet-ups of Neurodiversity Network B makes it possible for the networks to justify the reason the members became part of the networks.

### 4.3. Obstacles neurodivergent employees experience

Finally, the obstacles experienced by neurodiverse employees are considered in this research to analyse if the goals and activities of the network contribute to removing these obstacles and, accordingly, if the goals and activities contribute to the creation of inclusion (Roberson, 2006).

#### 4.3.1 Overstimulation

Both the organisations of Neurodiversity Network A and Neurodiversity Network B have open-plan offices. The open-plan offices are experienced as “*distracting*”, and “*tiring*” (interview B1, interview B2, interview B3) and cost a lot of energy (interview A3). In open-plan offices, employees struggle with noises and people passing by. Employees wear or want to wear headsets or mention a need for a quiet room. However, sitting in a silence room is not an option for Respondent A3 either:

*'Because then they also say, yesss, but we also have soundproof cubicles and then you can just sit there. But those are made of glass. So you see, then I see people walking by all the time. And yes, then we can just come into you, so we can still see each other. I say, but you can not. You can not, when I am sitting in such an aquarium, suddenly come in'* (interview A3).

Maher and von Hippel (2005) found that stimulus screening is one of the factors influencing the experience of the open-plan office. In this sense, neurodiverse employees, who have more trouble with stimulus screening, might experience the open-plan office as an obstacle. According to Maher and von Hippel (2005), employee satisfaction is fundamentally influenced by the "ability to block out distracting stimuli" (p. 228). Thus, to increase the satisfaction of employees who experience the open-plan office as an obstacle, the distracting stimuli should be blocked out. The organisation of Neurodiversity Network A wants to create silence rooms at one of the offices and sought the input of neurodivergent employees. Moreover, during the lunch session of the core team, the attendees briefly brainstormed about how silence rooms can be created at the office of Neurodiversity Network B. If the silence rooms are created, the obstacles neurodivergent employees experience in relation to open-plan offices may be reduced or eliminated.

Besides daily work, events organised by the organisation also overstimulate neurodiverse employees. The events are crowded, with a lot of noise and people standing too close:

*'Because it often goes quite um yes large-scaled, a lot of people are involved. There is a stage, with people eh talking with speakers and microphones. And well, you can there. For a lot of reasons, you can um not feel like it or difficult um um yes, difficult to participate in that'* (interview BB1).

Respondent BB1 expresses their desire to search for ways in which neurodivergent employees can be taken into account. If the events are changed, there may be a way to remove or reduce the obstacles experienced by neurodivergent employees.

Moreover, working hours can play a role in neurodiverse employees being overstimulated. Respondent BA1 shared being able to complete a significant amount of work in an hour but is

not able to do the same in the following hour. Respondent BA1 needs to paint miniatures, watch a series or go for a walk to de-stimulate. However, it does not influence his performance:

*‘But I do deliver, if I can believe my performance reviews, 40 hours of work. Or at least very good work. I am growing, so to speak. And I really like that I have an employer who does not question those hours, but just dares to look at the value, of the work I deliver and dares to appreciate me um and gives me the space to do so’* (interview BA1).

As seen in the quote, Respondent BA1 receives the room to arrange the working hours worked on their own, what is they appreciate, and which allows them to do good work. Neurodiversity Network B shared wanting to gather success examples and highlight them as positive and helpful – for example, a manager who shared the agenda of an event in advance, which other managers do not.

#### *4.3.2 Understanding of neurodiversity needed*

Respondent A3 and Respondent A5 shared their feelings that their managers have no sensitivity for their situations and/or did not understand them. However, with sensitivity to and understanding of, might be reduced or removed as can be seen in the example of Respondent A4. Respondent A4 shared that they were not performing well on some tasks. Rather than approaching their performance in a negative way, Respondent A4’s manager tried to identify the cause. Subsequently, Respondent A4 was empowered and placed in a function that fits with the respondent’s brain. With being with the “*right people in the right place*”, Respondent A4 claimed to not be experiencing any obstacles anymore (interview A4). Thus, being empowered and surrounded by the right people can help employees with work-related issues.

According to respondent A2, it is a huge challenge for managers to deal with the individual differences. If a manager, however, does not understand the neurodiverse employee or is facing problems, the neurodiversity network may be able to help the manager:

*‘For example, the other day we also had a manager who said, I have someone in my team where I um um want to learn to deal better with, that we that people can come to us, so we can refer them to for example coaches et cetera’* (interview BA1).

As seen in the quote, the network may support managers of neurodivergent employees as well, for example, by referring them to the right people within the organisation. Thus, understanding from managers can help neurodivergent employees overcome obstacles, but if managers do not understand neurodiversity, networks can provide help to managers as well.

## **Chapter 5 Discussion and conclusion**

The aim of this research was to gain insights into how neurodiversity networks contribute to the creation of an inclusive workplace for neurodivergent employees. By researching neurodiversity networks as a diversity management practice in terms of the goals, activities and obstacles experienced by neurodivergent employees, more insights were gained into how organisations can create an inclusive workplace for neurodivergent employees. First, theoretical contribution of this research is discussed in this chapter, followed by the limitations of this research and the implications for both future research and practices. Finally, a conclusion is drawn.

### **5.1 Theoretical contribution**

#### *Raising awareness*

The networks want to raise awareness about neurodiversity within the organisation, by, for example, providing knowledge, such as keynotes and masterclasses. As neurodiversity awareness refers to the knowledge of and information on neurodiversity influencing the perception of neurodiversity (Ali et al., 2024), presentations by experts and masterclasses may be helpful. As the neurodiversity networks also provide information on neurodiversity, they can be seen as centres of knowledge on neurodiversity in the organisation. This scenario is consistent with the findings by Dennissen et al. (2019), in which the disability network provide opportunities to learn about how disabled employees can contribute and serve as centre of expertise on disability issues within the organisation. What the networks in this research do include having conversations and brainstorming sessions with allies, such as HR and management, and asking for input from neurodivergent employees. An example of how neurodiversity networks can contribute to the creation of inclusion is by asking for input on the layout and design of silence rooms and making sure that it is used. However, raising awareness about neurodivergent perspectives is not enough to create inclusion. To create inclusion, obstacles to full participation and contribution must be removed (Roberson, 2006), which can be achieved through organisational practices and processes that (re)produce the inequalities in the organisation (Dennissen et al., 2019). Thus, if the neurodivergent perspectives would be used to change the policies and processes, neurodiversity networks can contribute to the creation of inclusion.

### *Visibility within the organisation*

Neurodiversity differs from disabilities, especially physical disabilities, as neurodiversity is often an invisible diversity (Shields & Beversdorf, 2020). In this sense, neurodiversity is comparable with, for example, LGBT networks, as neurodiversity may be a more stigmatised invisible social identity (Beaver, 2023). As described in the findings, employees need to feel safe to disclose that they are neurodiverse, which corresponds with previous research (McIntosh et al., 2023). According to Eller and Frey (2019), the only way in which someone feels completely safe is related to social belongingness. Previous research has already found that bringing members together can help reduce feelings of social isolation and increase feelings of being welcomed and engaged (Dennissen et al., 2019; Schlachter et al., 2024). As the network want to be a safe place, where employees can share experiences and meet each other, social isolation might be reduced. As described earlier, not feeling social belongingness can be seen as an obstacle to full participation (Roberson, 2006; Shore et al., 2011). However, as mentioned by Shore et al. (2011), employees need to feel both social belongingness and being valued for their uniqueness to create inclusion. Thus, obstacles of not feeling valued for the uniqueness need to be removed as well.

One way neurodiversity networks might contribute to removing the obstacle of not feeling valued is by creating a shift to a focus on strengths and qualities of neurodiverse employees instead of the challenges or limitations. Thus, by acting as a safe place and bringing people together and focussing the strengths and the qualities of neurodivergent employees, neurodiversity networks can contribute to the creation of inclusion. However, in this research, a tension is found between creating a safe space and deciding who may join the network or certain activities. On the one hand, neurodiverse employees want to feel safe by being with other neurodiverse employees. On the other hand, making joining an exclusive network for neurodivergent employees and becoming a member may feel like disclosing to some employees. This observation was made for LGBT networks as well, in which people felt that becoming a part of the LGBT network was like coming out (Beaver, 2023).

### *Support for management*

It is found that different managers react differently to the needs of and problems faced by neurodivergent employees. According to Shore and Chung (2022), an inclusive work environment for marginalised social identity groups is made highly effective by leader participation. Leaders can enhance employees' feelings of belongingness and being valued for their uniqueness (Shore & Chung, 2022). However, Shore and Chung (2022) focused their research on work groups instead of on organisation-level groups. However, if leader inclusion can influence organisational practices and processes, leader inclusion may contribute to the creation of inclusion, according to the framework of Dennissen et al. (2019). Neurodiversity networks can constitute a place to provide support for managers as well – for example by cross-referencing parties who may help or highlighting successful examples. These insights contribute to the existing literature, which is mainly focused on support for members of diversity networks (e.g., Bierema, 2005; Dennissen et al., 2019), or support by management and board in the form of time and resources (e.g., Schlachter et al., 2024). Since organisational practices and processes need to change, instead of individuals, according to Doyle and McDowall (2022), support from the network for managers may significantly contribute to the creation of inclusion.

### 5.2 Limitations and future research

One of the limitations of this research is the demographic distribution of the respondents. For example, a total of two women were interviewed, with one being a core team member and the other a member. Moreover, all the respondents were white, although one of the respondents claimed to be from a different western country. The experiences of obstacles within the organisation for neurodiverse white men may differ from those of people who identify with another marginalised social identity as well. For this reason, it is recommended for future research to include intersectionality in research on inclusive work environments for neurodiverse workers. The small number of respondents, without an equal distribution in forms of neurodiversity among the respondents, is also a limitation of this study. In future research, a large sample should be used for surveys. Moreover, the stage that the networks were in, namely (re)starting, created limitations for this study, as the respondents could tell little about what the networks do. In future research, networks that have been in existence for longer should be included in order to gain more insights into what the networks do and how the activities are perceived by (non-)members.

The sample selection constitutes another limitation. Both members and board members were involved. However, the members of the networks already know about the existence of the network and have about neurodiversity. To know about how to increase visibility and raise awareness, non-members should be involved in the research as well. Moreover, research should be conducted on how awareness can be raised and what types of activities and actions have an influence on increasing the awareness of neurodiversity. Furthermore, this research concentrated specifically on neurodiversity networks. However, certain goals and activities of these networks were found to correspond with the goals of disability networks. Future research should, hence, explore intersectionality with disability networks.

### 5.3 Practical implications

A practical implication for neurodiverse employees is that raising awareness on neurodiversity and neurodiverse perspectives on certain topics, such as vacancies, is not enough. To create inclusion and achieve the desired work environment, extensive changes need to be made. To do so, neurodivergent perspectives should be included in the change in organisational practices and processes. Moreover, it is advised for neurodiversity networks to take a broader look at the allies involved besides HR and management. Other departments within the organisation, such as facility management, can contribute to creating a desired environment as well. Especially as neurodivergent employees express having troubles with open-plan offices, contact should be made with facility management. At the same time, neurodiversity networks need to decide who might be involved in the network or in the activities, with the accompanying potential consequences such as feeling less safe or feeling the need to disclose.

According to Ghorashi and Sabelis (2013), to include others, managers and colleagues are required to reflect on themselves and their own positions. As mentioned earlier, neurodiversity networks can contribute to the creation of inclusion by supporting managers as well. The network can, for example, by organising keynotes and masterclasses, help managers and colleagues reflect on themselves and their own positions. Finally, networks should continuously inventory the obstacles employees' experience and the needs employees have in relation to the network. By knowing what obstacles neurodiverse workers face, neurodiversity networks can better anticipate how the network can contribute to creating an inclusive working environment.

## 5.4 Conclusion

To answer the research question, neurodiversity networks have different objectives and different forms of activities that contribute to the vision of the networks of creating an inclusive, safe and fair environment for neurodivergent employees while also contributing to organisational visions and objectives. To create inclusion, networks should foster change at the organisational level, including organisational policies and practices. In this research, there are examples in which networks may contribute to the creation of organisational change. However, no evidence of any change has been found.

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## Appendix 1 Respondents overview

Board members:

Respondents	Organisation	Neurodiversity	Duration interview
BA1	Organisation A	ADHD, Asperger, Gifted	48 minutes
BB1	Organisation B	Neurodiverse	55 minutes
BB2	Organisation B	Neurotypical	46 minutes

*Table 2 Overview respondents board members*

Non-board members:

Respondents	Organisation	Neurodiversity	Duration interview
A1	Organisation A	Autism	27 minutes
A2	Organisation A	Neurotypical, Neurodiverse sons	38 minutes
A3	Organisation A	Autism	34 minutes
A4	Organisation A	ADHD	59 minutes
A5	Organisation A	Gifted	42 minutes
B1	Organisation B	ADHD	52 minutes
B2	Organisation B	Neurotypical	45 minutes
B3	Organisation B	ADHD	38 minutes
B4	Organisation B	Neurotypical	36 minutes

*Table 3 Overview respondents members network*

## **Appendix 2 Interview guides**

### **Introduction**

#### *Thanking the respondent*

First of all, I would like to thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview.

#### *Introducing*

This interview will be conducted for my master's thesis with the aim of gaining insight into the network of [organisation name].

#### *Confidentiality*

I will keep the information you provide confidential. The interview will be completely anonymous, meaning that any words or phrases that could be traced back to your identity will be anonymised. For analysing purposes, I would like to transcribe this interview. To do this, I would like to record the interview using Teams, which will store the interview in Teams. Once I have received my master's degree, the interview will be deleted immediately. Do you give permission for this interview to be recorded?

#### *Duration of the interview*

This interview will take a maximum of one hour.

#### *Structure of the interview*

The interview will cover three topics. There are no right or wrong answers, it is all about your knowledge and opinions.

Do you have any questions at this stage?

I will now start recording the interview. As a formality, after the recording has started, I will ask you again if you agree to the interview being recorded.

### **Start recording**

Do you give permission for this interview to be recorded? You can stop the interview at any time. Do you understand this?

Interview guide board members:

*General*

- Would you like to introduce yourself?
- How did you get involved in the network?
- What is the reason you became a board member of the network?
- What is your role in the network?
- What makes the network necessary in [organisation name]?

*Network membership, structure and objectives*

- How is the network organised?
- How many members does the network have?
- How is membership organised?
- What was the reason for establishing the network? How was it established? When?
- How did the network develop after its development?
- What are the goals of the network?

*Activities*

- What does the network do?
- What activities does the network organise?

*The network in the organisation*

- How does the organisation support the network?
- What is the contact between the network and the management?
- What is the role of the network in the organisation?
- How do you see the future of the network?

Interview guide questions non-board:

*General*

- Would you like to introduce yourself?
- How did you get involved in the network?
- What is the reason for your membership / involvement in the network?
- What makes the network necessary in [organisation name]?

*Activities*

- What does the network do?
- What activities does the network organise?

*Network member experiences*

- How would you evaluate the organised activities?
- What kind of activities would you like to see added? What is the reason for this?

Closing

Is there anything you would like to add? Is there anything else you would like to discuss that you think I should know or take away with me?

Do you have any other questions?

**Stop recording**

Debrief

If you wish, I can send you the transcript. Would you like this?

To reiterate how the data will be stored, the recording will be kept until I have completed my studies. The transcript will be kept longer, it would not be possible to derive your identity from the transcript.

Thank you again for your participation and have a nice day.

## Appendix 3 Observation guide

Goal	Key concepts	Notes
After the observation, data is available on the type of activity organised by the network.	What type of activity?	
	What is the goal of the activity?	
	What is happening?	
After the observation, it is clear who was present. This can help create understanding about the allies involved.	Who is involved?	
By finding out what is discussed, more insight can be created on what the contribution of the network is. In addition, depending on what is told, insight can be gained about the obstacles people have.	What is discussed?	
	What is said?	
The setting is the context, but also provides insight into the inclusion of the activity itself. Perhaps the obstacles people experience are also reflected in the activity itself.	What is the setting?	
Maybe other findings will be found, which are not included in this observation guide.	Others?	

## Appendix 4 Documents overview

Reference documents in this research	Document topic	Document type	Neurodiversity Network
Document Advice Plan	Advice plan to management	PDF	B
Document Confluence Page	Screenshots of the confluence page were shared	Screenshots	B
Document DE&I	The DE&I report of the mother company	Email PDF	B
Document Example	An example of a manager who shared the planning of an event in advance	Email	B
Document External Expert	Tips and training for HR and neurodiversity	PowerPoint Brochure Emails	B
Document Feedback session	Invitation of the feedback session after the first keynote.	Invitation Microsoft Teams	B
Document Functions	To have a concrete insight of who are involved within the board or the direction	Webpages	A and B
Document Diversity Networks A	Searched for the diversity networks within the organisation.	Webpage	A and B
Document Invitation brainstorm silence room	A post with an invitation to brainstorm along about creation a silence room.	Screenshot	A
Document Invitation Loesje	The invitation of the Loesje workshop.	Screenshot	A
Document Invitation Online Masterclass	The invitation of the online Masterclass in 2021.	Screenshot	A
Document Keynote	Invitation Keynote	Invitation Microsoft Teams	B
Document Network in past	A document about the neurodiversity network in the past.	PDF	A

	A question and a reaction via email about the document	Email	A
Document Neurodiversity & Leadership	Email for preparation of brainstorming session to core team and managers	Email	B
	Outcomes of the brainstorming session	Email	B
Document Observations	PowerPoint used during the observations	PowerPoint	B
	The notes of the contact person during the first observation.	Email	B
Document Reflection Mother Company	A reflection of the learnings of Inclusion Networks day by the mother company	Email	B
Document Survey	The survey about ideas for more inclusive workplace	Google Survey	B
	The outcomes of the survey have been shared.	Excel	B
Document Webpage board	In one of the documents, a suspicion of someone's position in the board was given. To check if the person is in the board, the webpage of the board has been used.	Webpage	B
Document Why	The document with Why, How and What of the network so far	Email PowerPoint	B

## Appendix 5 Code tree

<i>Examples open codes</i>	<i>Axial codes</i>	<i>Selective codes</i>
<i>Core team</i> <i>Former board member</i> <i>Open to join core team</i>	Memberships network	Structure network
<i>Budget managed by HR</i> <i>Asking for budget</i> <i>Budgets per community</i>	Budget	
<i>Network young employees</i> <i>Network disabilities</i> <i>Different from other diversities</i>	Other diversity networks	
<i>Early phase</i> <i>Orientation phase</i> <i>Restarting</i>	Phase network	
<i>Support from HR</i> <i>Strategy involved</i> <i>Management involved</i>	Allies involved	
<i>When all else fails</i> <i>Inclusive work environment</i> <i>Safe work environment</i>	Focused on employees	Reason of existence
<i>Reducing turnover employees</i> <i>Ambition organisation</i> <i>Mission and vision organisation</i>	Focused on organisation	
<i>Aware of neurodiversity</i> <i>Awareness needed</i> <i>Sharing feelings creating awareness</i>	Raise awareness	Goal and activities
<i>No knowledge activities community</i> <i>Intranet fleeting</i> <i>Cross-references</i>	Increasing visibility	
<i>Accept others being different</i> <i>Acceptance of neurodiversity</i> <i>Differences accepted</i>	Increase acceptance	
<i>Collaboration with each other</i> <i>Not “wij-zij”</i> <i>Together effect</i>	Not us-versus-them thinking	
<i>Negatively framed</i> <i>Automatic focus negative aspect</i> <i>Focus positive and potential</i>	Focus on strengths	
<i>Different ways of thinking</i> <i>Everyone different needs</i> <i>One better A, other B</i>	Differences between people	
<i>Like-minded (peer) meet-up</i> <i>Being safe come out neurodiverse</i> <i>With problems place to go</i>	Safe place	
<i>Vacancy more inclusive</i> <i>Insights from a neurodiverse perspective</i> <i>Neurodiversity and leadership</i>	Neurodivergent perspectives	

<i>Coaches autism</i> <i>Referral manager to</i> <i>Via network coaches</i>	Support for managers	
<i>Active information gathering</i> <i>Insights into the problem</i> <i>Listening needs employees</i>	Inventorying obstacles	
<i>Insights from mother company</i> <i>Inspiration mother company</i> <i>Mother company</i>	Insights other company	
<i>Collect and highlight examples</i> <i>Sharing in advance</i>	Collect examples	
<i>Involved network for son</i> <i>Receiving information</i> <i>Sharing experience</i> <i>Meet up share experiences</i> <i>Learning experiences each other</i>	Child neurodiverse Receive information Share experiences	Reason membership
<i>Hearing experiences</i> <i>How others dealing</i> <i>Curious experiences others</i>	Hearing experiences others	
<i>Wanted help</i> <i>Getting advice</i>	Get advice	
<i>Seeing improvements in organisation</i>	Insights improvements	
<i>Interruptions work</i> <i>Open office plan</i> <i>Silence rooms</i>	Open office plan	Obstacles neurodivergent employees
<i>Company broad event noise</i> <i>Big events very loud</i> <i>ART event crowded</i>	Events	
<i>Attendance meeting own decision</i> <i>Costs energy</i> <i>Mandatory office days</i>	Mandatory attendance	
<i>Deviate behaviour quickly labelled</i> <i>Stigma</i> <i>Labelled as different</i>	Labels	
<i>De-stimulating</i> <i>Basis on trust</i> <i>Working hours more flexible</i>	Working hours	
<i>Do not understand autism</i> <i>Frustration not understanding</i> <i>Not understanding</i>	Feelings of understanding	