

*Food for Thought*¹: Managing Neurodiverse Workers in a Restaurant²

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Abstract. In 2021, Marie Jones (alias) and her team established a restaurant – *Food for Thought* (alias) – that employs neurodiverse employees alongside neurotypical employees. In addition to proving good quality food and service, their long-term goal was to train neurodiverse workers, who could then integrate into more “orthodox” restaurants that generally hire only neurotypical workers. In fact, the latter was the founders’ passion towards contributing to society. During the initial training and hiring of potential employees, they discussed this possibility while also trying to understand the candidates’ aspirations. In 2023, they were taking stock of the situation – the restaurant was running well but they were also considering a bigger question – were they ready to outpace their neurodiverse employees to other restaurants and hire and train new neurodiverse employees? The case sheds light on the steps that organisations can take for hiring, training and integrating neurodiverse employees and how certain organizational processes could be adapted to suit their needs. It also analyses an ethical dilemma for a responsible organisation and how it can balance the goals of efficiency and their vision of doing good for society at large.

Keywords: neurodiversity, hiring and recruitment, employee training, social responsibility, diversity and inclusion.

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1. “Food for thought” is an idiomatic expression that refers to something that should be thought about or considered carefully (source: Merriam Webster Dictionary).
 2. This is a fictional case based on facts, public information, and real operations of an actual restaurant. All the information has been anonymised to respect the privacy and confidentiality of the subjects. Nevertheless, informed written consent from the interviewed persons has been obtained. This case is intended to be used as a basis for class discussion rather than to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of a management situation. The described situations do not represent any behavioural rule, and the authors do not offer opinions about any described situations or actions. The related teaching note should not be used in any way that would prejudice the future use of the case.

We would like to thank one of the founders of *Food for Thought*, in this case with the alias Marie Jones, for the availability and quality of the time and information shared, but above all, for giving us the opportunity to explore further the very interesting and responsible subject of diversity, equity and inclusion of neurodiverse individuals into the labour market and society at large.

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1. Introduction

It is the spring of 2023. Marie Jones (alias) and the management team of *Food for Thought* (alias), a restaurant based in a metropolis in Europe, were taking stock of the progress made thus far and are contemplating their next steps. As they did so, they were also discussing their initial vision at the time they established the restaurant. In 2017, when Marie set out on the business venture, her goal was not only to establish a restaurant known for food and quality of service, but one in which neurodiverse employees work alongside neurotypical employees. In doing so, she had a larger vision: that the restaurant could potentially be a training ground for many such neurodiverse workers and it would instil in them the necessary confidence to prepare them for integration into ‘orthodox’ restaurants. This, naturally meant that the trained workforce would eventually quit *Food for Thought* to work in other restaurants.

After careful planning, Marie and the team established the restaurant in 2021. Over time, the operations ran smoothly. Despite the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, it had become established and remained in business. It employed several neurodiverse workers and in doing so, contributed to their well-being and in the process, served society at large. Finally, the restaurant earned excellent customer reviews, attracting a substantial number of repeat customers. Nevertheless, the management team was now facing a substantial ethical dilemma: should they, as per the initial vision, start the process of outplacing their neurodiverse workers, whom they had trained over the past few years, to other restaurants in the industry and then hire and train new employees? As the management team discussed this question, they knew that the answer would not be straightforward, and any course of action they took would have advantages and disadvantages for the restaurant as well as the employees. What should they do?

2. Initial Motivation for Setting up *Food for Thought*

In 2006, Marie Jones graduated with a master’s degree in business administration (MBA) from a well-known business school in Europe. After graduation, she worked in the IT field for around 10 years. As she pursued her career, she felt the need to give back to society and associate with a non-profit organisation. One of her friends introduced her to an organisation that was working for young neurodiverse people with cognitive conditions such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, down syndrome, dyspraxia, dyslexia, etc. This was Marie’s first experience of working with neurodiverse people. It was, indeed, very positive and full of surprises – she discovered a world full of joy and simplicity, something that she was not expecting, and second, she was touched to see how people interacted with each other without pretence. Over time, she felt very engaged and invested in the organisation and began volunteering