

# How To Be More Neuro-Inclusive In The Workplace: A Guide for HR

# Introduction

To be truly neuro-inclusive in the workplace, employers need to increase the awareness and knowledge of neurodiversity for all employees and appreciate the individuality of neurodiverse conditions so that they can provide adequate support. We understand that it can be challenging to know where to start, so this guide is here to provide you with an overview of neurodiversity and its effects on mental health and work, as well as what you can do throughout the employee lifecycle to be more neuro-inclusive.

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# Understanding Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity is the idea that not all brains think or feel in the same way and that everyone, whether they are neurotypical or neurodivergent, should be treated equally. Most people are neurotypical, meaning that the brain functions and processes information in the way society expects. However, it is estimated that around 1 in 7 people are neurodivergent, meaning that the brain functions, learns and processes information differently. This accounts for more than 15% of people in the UK.

Neurodiversity includes everyone, but individuals with neurodivergent traits may meet a diagnostic threshold for neurodivergent conditions such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dysgraphia, Dyscalculia and Tourette's Syndrome.

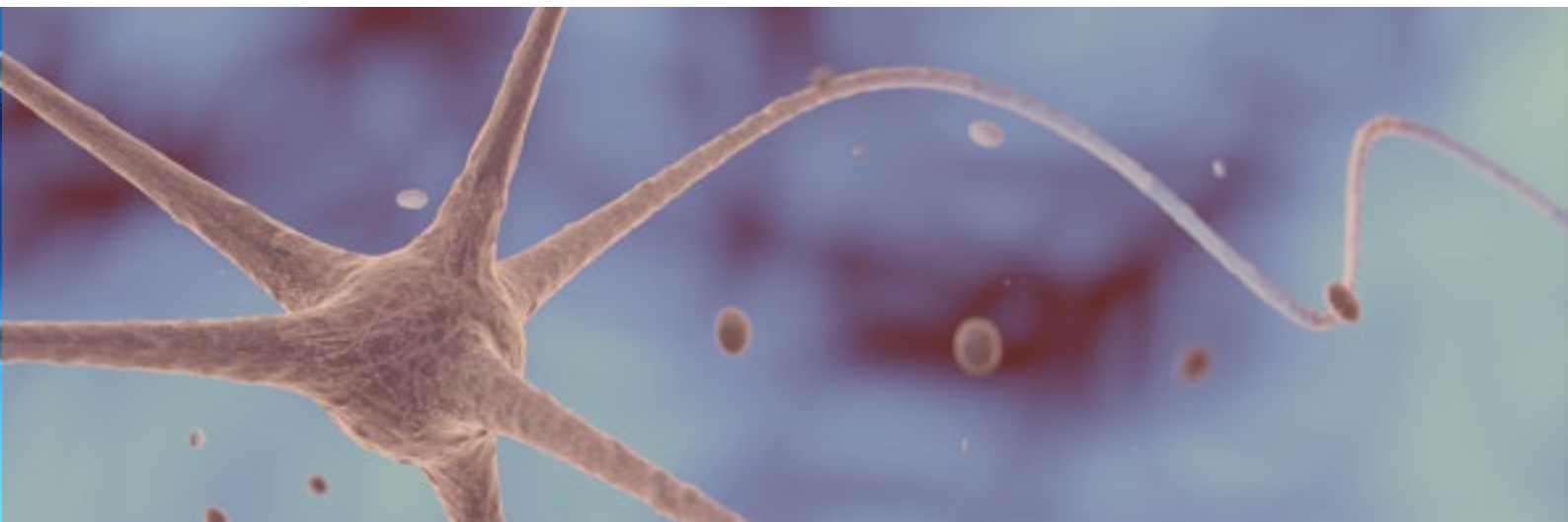
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*“If you have met one person with autism,  
you have met one person with autism.”*

”

This saying applies to all neurodivergent individuals, not just those with Autism. Each form of neurodivergence has a range of associated characteristics and these can vary from individual to individual, and can change over time. It is also common for an individual to have the characteristics of more than one type of neurodivergence.

Therefore, to be truly neuro-inclusive in the workplace, we need to increase our awareness and knowledge of neurodiversity and appreciate the individuality of neurodiverse conditions so that we can support all employees.



# Neurodiversity and Mental Health

Research has shown that people with neurodivergent conditions are more likely to have mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety. Having a neurodivergent condition can directly impact mental health for a variety of reasons, examples include:

- Some neurodivergent conditions directly cause difficulties with mood and emotional regulation.
- It can be stressful to try and 'fit in' to environments that do not match or support your way of thinking.
- Being sensitive to stimuli like loud working environments or difficulty in reading other people can cause significant stress or anxiety.
- Difficulty 'fitting in', meeting expectations or finding a suitable job can lead to depression as well as difficulties with self-esteem and confidence.
- Those with neurodiverse conditions are unfortunately more likely to experience more negative life events, face stigma and discrimination from other people and services.
- 'Masking' one's neurodivergence can be tiring and increase the stress/strain experienced by an individual.
- There are fewer resources and support to help neurodiverse individuals develop positive coping skills.

**Note: Having a neurodiverse condition does not mean you have a mental health condition. However, due to the reasons above, they are often comorbid.**



# Neurodiversity at Work

## How neurodivergence can affect employees at work

Workplaces are typically built for neurotypical conformity and are ill-equipped for neurodivergence. This means that many work environments and practices do not support neurodiverse employees. However, due to the lack of awareness and knowledge surrounding neurodiversity, many employers do not understand the ways in which a neurodiverse condition may negatively impact an individual at work.

Without going into the specific details of each neurodiverse condition and acknowledging that every individual is different, here are some areas that may be impacted by neurodivergence at work:

- Concentration and focus
- Procrastination
- Energy levels
- Social interaction and communication
- Spelling, reading and writing
- Arithmetic ability
- Organisation, planning and/or maintaining a schedule
- Memory ability
- Sense of direction
- Vision and hearing



## The benefits of a neurodiverse workforce

Whilst ill-equipped workplaces can pose significant challenges to neurodiverse employees, when supported correctly, neurodiverse talent can significantly increase the competitive advantage of an organisation.

Traits commonly seen in neurodiverse people include empathy, creativity, persistence, imagination, energy, problem solving and analytical skills. This means that having a neurodiverse workforce can bring talent, perspective and skills that may not be achieved from neurotypical employees alone. Thus providing companies with a competitive edge that brings both financial and cultural benefits. These benefits occur as neurodiverse employees bring:

- Creativity and innovation
- Lateral thinking
- Strategic analysis
- Bringing a different perspective
- Strong problem-solving and spatial reasoning capabilities
- Consistency in tasks once mastered
- Sustained attention to detail
- Information processing advantage
- Quality assurance
- Employee engagement

### Insightful statistics:

JPMorgan Chase reports that professionals in its Autism at Work initiative make fewer errors and are 90% to 140% more productive than neurotypical employees.<sup>1</sup>

Dependability, motivation, engagement and peer integration: at least 86% of employers rated employees with neurodiverse conditions as good or very good in all four areas.<sup>2</sup>





## Neurodiversity and the law

Whilst there is a moral and business case for being a neuro-inclusive employer, there is also a legal one that all organisations should be aware of.

Although many neurodivergent workers will not think of themselves as being disabled, it is likely that they will satisfy the legal definition of disability and are therefore protected under the Equality Act 2010.

In the Equality Act 2010, a disability is defined as a physical or mental condition that has a substantial and long-term impact on your ability to complete day-to-day activities. There are six main types of disability discrimination that employers should be aware of:

1. Direct discrimination
2. Indirect discrimination
3. Failure to make reasonable adjustments
4. Discrimination arising from disability
5. Harassment
6. Victimisation

In relation to point 3, employers have a duty to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that workplace policies and practices do not disadvantage neurodivergent employees; examples of which are discussed on page 10 of this guide.



# How To Be Neuro-Inclusive Throughout The Employee Lifecycle: An Overview



## Change

Approaching change in a neuro-inclusive way should underpin all elements of the employee lifecycle.

- Include neurodiverse employees in change programmes
- Give notice of changes and be clear on future expectations
- Utilise different communication channels to ensure accessibility for all





## Recruitment

The recruitment process should focus on getting the right people in the right roles. To ensure you are getting the best from neurodivergent candidates, you need to ensure that your recruitment process is neuro-inclusive. Here are three ways you can do this:

### Tip 1: Make job adverts and JD's simple and accurate

You should keep both of these documents simple and only include the necessary information. Neurodiverse individuals often think literally and therefore will not apply if they do not have all the skills listed, so think: what is the job and what does the applicant actually need to be successful in the role? As well as considering the language and terminology used, you should also evaluate the font size, colour and styles used in the recruitment process.

### Tip 2: Ask applicants what they need

Encourage applicants to disclose any additional requirements needed. This could be as simple as including a question box on an application form, or including something along the lines of *“We are a neuro-inclusive employer and encourage applicants to disclose any additional requirements they need during the recruitment process; so, what can we do to make this the best possible experience for you?”* in your communication emails.

### Tip 3: Adjust your interview/assessment process

Really consider the best way to assess suitability for the role. If an interview is needed, think about what may help neurodivergent candidates feel more confident; you may provide interview questions in advance so that answers can be pre-prepared or give a clear structure/expectations for assessment days for example. You should also ensure that your interview panel are trained in neurodiversity/inclusion and include current neurodivergent colleagues in any process reviews, i.e. what were the lessons learnt from our latest recruitment campaign?





## Onboarding

Starting a new role can be daunting and anxiety-provoking for any individual, but particularly more so for those who are neurodivergent. To make onboarding more neuro-inclusive, here are three implementations you may want to consider:

### Tip 1: Provide information on the work environment prior to the first day

Letting employees know what to expect can significantly reduce stress and anxiety leading up to the first day. For example, you may wish to send an information pack with a schedule or some pictures of the work environment and team ahead of time. This pack should be guided by what the employee has highlighted as potential challenges or additional requirements that may be needed during the recruitment process.

### Tip 2: Create a jargon handbook

Are there any phrases, abbreviations or acronyms that your company uses regularly? Providing an explanation of these to any new starter would be beneficial, especially those who are neurodivergent. This could also be accompanied by a culture handbook (if you have one) explaining the ways things are done, thus allaying any 'fear of the unknown' concerns they may have. It's often the simplest of things that can make someone feel better about starting, such as knowing where everyone goes for lunch, or what time people typically finish work etc.

### Tip 3: Take time to ask and understand individual challenges and strengths

It is important to understand what the individuals' challenges and strengths are from the beginning so that you can support them. Are there any tools that might be useful to enable them to shine in their role? This is when you might want to consider whether any reasonable adjustments need to be implemented. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- Inclusive technology options - like colour filters for screens or assistive text software
- Flexible working
- Providing written summaries of meetings or allowing for recordings
- Frequent breaks
- Job design - e.g. the employee may prefer one task at a time versus multiple tasks
- Work environment considerations e.g. quieter space or providing a balance chair to allow for more movement when seated



## Performance Management

Quite often, neurodivergent individuals face formal capability procedures unnecessarily because the organisations' processes are not neuro-inclusive. Here are three ways you can best support your neurodivergent employees to enhance performance to benefit both the individual and the business:

### Tip 1: Identify skills gaps and implement initiatives to close these

What does 'performance management' mean to your organisation? If it is addressing performance issues and ensuring that employees are meeting individual and organisational goals effectively and efficiently, you could endeavour to anticipate challenges and support needs ahead of time so that you know that everything is in place for employees to reach their potential. This could also include implementing appropriate reasonable adjustments as mentioned earlier and should be considered prior to proceeding with any formal capability measures.

### Tip 2: Closely monitor changes in performance

As you would with all employees, be aware of changes in performance. If performance has changed, try to determine why: has there been a change in the type or volume of work, the staff, location or routine for example? For some neurodivergent individuals, change can be extremely challenging so anticipating this would be helpful. If you notice changes in performance, do not be afraid to check in and see if there is anything you can do to help get them back on track.

### Tip 3: Provide regular check-ins and mentorship opportunities

Regularly checking in to ensure your employees have all they need to be able to thrive and perform at their best is key. Having a consistent, supportive and knowledgeable manager and/or mentor will enable proactive support rather than reactive. Sometimes having the opportunity to seek a second opinion or simply gain reassurance on an idea or course of action can be hugely beneficial, particularly for someone who may be struggling with increased anxiety.





## Development

Employee development aims to improve the skills and knowledge of employees and if done correctly can improve retention. It is therefore important to consider whether the development activities and learning opportunities are engaging, motivating and inclusive for neurodivergent colleagues.

### Tip 1: Set stretching goals and projects with adequate support

Having a neurodivergent condition does not mean you shouldn't be stretched or take on new opportunities, however, it does require managers to be mindful of how the individual might receive the direction, to ensure they do not feel overwhelmed by the new task. This is all about wrapping the right support around the request and ensuring that the individual feels confident that they have been set up for success.

### Tip 2: Involve neurodiverse employees in key project teams

Having neurodiverse employees in your key project teams will not only provide different perspectives, ideas and creativity, but it can also help break the stigma of others perhaps not wishing to speak up. Neurodiverse thinking can generate a totally new way of approaching problem-solving and when others see the concept of all ideas being welcomed, this can be a catalyst for further change and growth within the team/organisational culture. Leaders should role model positive behaviour within any such team sessions, signalling that they are open to new ideas and are not afraid to support innovation and challenge convention.

### Tip 3: Train for growth by asking employees what they want/need

You should encourage your neurodivergent employees to tell you what skills and experiences they would like to develop. You cannot assume that they are wanting to take a particular career path, as when you discuss their aspirations, you might be surprised by their responses. Linked to this, your standard toolkit may not meet all their needs or aspirations and may require enhancements as a result. You should ask them which formats they would prefer to learn in and whether there are any additional requirements needed for your workplace to be more inclusive.





## Retention

Effective employee retention is key to business success and it is important to recognise that there is no 'one size fits all' approach here. Here are three things you can do to increase the retention of your neurodiverse talent:

### Tip 1: Keep the work environment optimal and stable

Ensuring you have the right work environment will support the retention of all employees, but especially those who are neurodivergent. Taking time to understand the preferences of neurodivergent employees and trying to accommodate for these will be hugely beneficial. For example, you may want to consider noise levels, lighting and equipment needs that may help them thrive in the workplace. Don't underestimate the impact that little environmental changes can have on engagement levels!

### Tip 2: Understand what engages and motivates neurodiverse employees

Neurodiverse talent is immense talent - do not lose them! You need to keep them engaged and motivated to increase retention. By taking on board all of the tips in this guide, you are likely to be in a good position already, but make sure you regularly appreciate and recognise employee contributions and strive to keep learning and developing your inclusion strategy. By really understanding how neurodiverse employees like to be recognised (and potentially rewarded) you can ensure any recognition or appreciation initiatives are truly neuro-inclusive and are not simply taken as an 'off the shelf' package, created from neurotypical employee feedback.

### Tip 3: Ensure that your workplace culture is open, supportive and inclusive

Having a supportive culture where employees can be themselves without fear of judgement is key to employee wellbeing and satisfaction. Here are our top tips for building an open, supportive and neuro-inclusive culture:

- Publicly declare that you are actively striving to be a neuro-inclusive employer.
- Educate all employees on neurodiversity in the workplace.
- Provide unconscious bias and inclusion training for all employees.
- Introduce 'neurodiversity champions' and/or support groups.
- Train people managers to ensure they understand how the business supports neurodivergent employees and the reasonable adjustments available to them.
- Review your organisation's policies and procedures to ensure they support neurodiverse inclusion.
- Ensure there are open channels of communication for employees to report negative experiences in the workplace, and address their responses.





## Change

**Approaching change in a neuro-inclusive way should underpin all elements of the employee lifecycle.**

Change is inevitable within organisations, however, it can be a huge source of anxiety or distress for neurodiverse colleagues. It is therefore important to capture their needs when carrying out any form of change, whether at an organisation or local level as the smallest amount of change may negatively impact employees.

### **Tip 1: Include neurodiverse employees in change programmes**

Neurodivergent employees are not neurotypical and are therefore more likely to be creative problem solvers and change agents. By including a neurodiverse task force when implementing organisational change, you will not only see better results for the organisation, you are more likely to anticipate and prepare for the challenges your neurodivergent employees might face.

### **Tip 2: Give notice of changes and be clear on future expectations**

For some neurodivergent employees, change can be a significant trigger for stress and anxiety. Being clear on upcoming changes and future expectations will help with any transition required and enable you to support employees better. Having documentation such as frequently asked questions is good practice for any change programme, however, even more so for allaying the concerns of neurodivergent employees. Focus groups are also a good way of helping to land key messages around large scale changes, so we advise there is neurodiverse representation on these forums and their views are captured and acted upon.

### **Tip 3: Utilise different communication channels to ensure accessibility for all**

In any change programme, communication is key; this is especially important for neurodivergent employees. You may wish to consider using different communication channels to ensure it is accessible for all employees. You should also consider the timing, frequency, clarity and necessity of communication to reduce overwhelm and ensure the message is clear. It's also perfectly acceptable to check on how any key messages landed and whether anything different should be done for next time.





With thanks to Melanie Francis, HR Director and Neurodiversity Champion, for her support in creating this guide.

**Sources:**

1. Overlooked workers gain appeal in challenging times. *The Financial Times*, 17 March 2020.
2. *Employing People with Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, Institute for Corporate Productivity, 2014.