

How-to Guide

NEURODIVERSITY AT WORK

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Authors:

Dr Simon Kelly, Senior Lecturer in Management and

Dr Gemma Bend, Senior Lecturer in Management, Huddersfield University



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How to Guide: Neurodiversity at Work

How to Guide: Neurodiversity at Work

A mini guide to help employers with neurodiversity inclusion in the workplace. The findings in this guide derive from a partnership between The University of Huddersfield and BITC's Yorkshire & Humber Regional Board, funded by the ESRC and AHRC UK research councils.

Why take action

According to UK government figures, the employment rate for disabled people is 54.2%, compared to 82% for the non-disabled. If the disability includes forms of neurodiversity such as autism, then employment rates drop to 22%. The reasons for the employment gap are not clear, but recent studies have suggested that misleading stereotypes and a lack of knowledge and understanding about neurodiversity are significant factors.

For example, a recent survey involving 127 UK employers and 990 neurodivergent workers, by McDowall (2023), found that 65% of workers feared discrimination after disclosing a condition and felt that management did not have sufficient knowledge of neurodiversity to support them.

On the employer side, 69% of employers surveyed found the lack of disclosure

among workers difficult to manage but also reported that they had little confidence in providing reasonable adjustments for their workforce. As the authors of the study concluded, this represents something of a catch-22 in which a lack of knowledge and understanding has led to a breakdown of trust in the employment relationship.

The good news is that employers are increasingly interested in finding out more about neurodiversity, how to support staff members, and how they might better understand the many benefits that recruiting, retaining, and developing staff from a neurodiverse talent pool can bring.

How to talk about neurodiversity

At its foundation, neurodiversity refers to the diversity of all humans in terms of neurocognitive function, sensory processing, and communication styles. The term neurodiversity was first coined by Australian academic Judy Singer in 1999, who was autistic and dissatisfied with the way in which autism was understood and represented.

More recently autistic academic Nick Walker has added to this understanding by suggesting an important distinction between the *neurotypical* and the *neurodivergent*.

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Neurotypical refers to how closely your outward behaviour, communication style, and nervous system might align with accepted societal norms and expectations.

Neurodivergent refers to how much your behaviour, communication style, and nervous system diverges from these accepted societal norms and expectations.

How far somebody diverges from these standards may change depending upon a person's neurotype, their sensory profile, and the support needs they are able to access. If a neurodivergence meets specific diagnostic criteria (self-diagnosed or via a formal psychiatric assessment), then it might also be given a name such as autism (autism spectrum disorder), or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia, or Tourette syndrome.

However, just because somebody may not meet these formal diagnostic criteria, it does not mean that they do not require recognition and support. It is also very common to have more than one neurodivergence, such as autism and ADHD. These overlaps can come with their own unique experiences and challenges.

Key takeaway

Neurodiversity includes everybody and so *we are all neurodiverse*. However, some of us are neurodivergent and this can come with certain challenges when you struggle to fit with agreed upon neurotypical standards and expectations.

Difference *not* deficit

Many of the diagnostic names for forms of neurodivergence have the word 'disorder' in their title. It is important to recognise that while these psychiatric categories are important, they also tend to use language from a **medical model of disability** in which being neurodivergent is framed as having deficits or weaknesses that need to be overcome.

An alternative view popular with disabled and neurodivergent communities is adopting a **social model of disability** approach, in which disability is produced by the external environment that an individual is required to fit within.

An example of this is the design of physical spaces that do not accommodate wheelchair users. Similarly, a space, process, or social activity that does not accommodate for different cognitive functioning, different communication styles, and different sensory processing may feel very disabling for somebody who is neurodivergent.

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The medical and social models also inform the language we use to talk about neurodiversity. A good example of this is what is often referred to as 'person-first' versus 'identity-first' language and how this influences how we talk about forms of neurodivergence. Take the following ways in which we might talk about autism:

- To say that somebody *has autism* uses **person-first language**. Autism is positioned as separate to the person. It does not define them or reduce them to their disability. Person-first language is often used by the medical profession and by the news media.
- To say somebody *is autistic* uses **identity-first language**. Autism is positioned as a lived experience and an important life-long identity that should not be reduced to an affliction or illness. Identity-first language is preferred by the autistic community.

Try to be mindful of the language that neurodivergent people use themselves and respect this. In the autistic community identity-first language is often preferred (with person-first language sometimes considered offensive).

In contrast, ADHD communities will sometimes use person-first (i.e. I have ADHD). If you are unsure of somebody's preference it is advisable to use identity-first language as a starting point for any conversation about neurodiversity.

Creating a neuroinclusive workplace

Neuro-inclusion in Action: Two Case Studies



The following case studies are from BITC members who participated in the research partnership with the University of Huddersfield:

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Case Study 1: Celebrating sensory and cognitive difference at Leeds Building Society.

Business in the Community (BITC) member Leeds Building Society have taken active steps to work with a social model of disability approach in their own neurodiversity and inclusion work. In addition to creating a neurodiversity staff network as part of their EDI strategy, they have also introduced fidget toys (also called 'stim' or 'sensory' toys) into the workspace.

Whenever an in-person meeting is held small baskets of fidget toys are available on the table for any employee to use. The basket is accompanied by a short written welcome message introducing the toys and hand gel to ensure hygiene. As a powerful example of neuro-inclusion, these toys are not aimed specifically at neurodivergent staff members but are available to all.

Katie Wynn, Diversity and Inclusion Manager at Leeds Building Society explains:

"We are committed to creating spaces where our colleagues feel valued and set up for success. Having fidget resources in our rooms is just another way to enable our colleagues to be at their best, just as much as chairs are there for someone to sit and pens are there to capture notes. They are just part of the furniture and through making them available we are normalising their use. It's a cultural shift, creating a space where people feel like they can belong and be themselves – which ultimately has those ongoing benefits around engagement and productivity."

Holding and moving objects in a repetitive way can be grounding and soothing for neurodivergent people. This is often called 'stimming' (self-stimulating) and can help manage sensory overwhelm, maintain focus, or simply as a way to redirect energy.

Everybody stims (clicking pens, hair pulling, nail biting) and everybody feels better when they can do their favourite stim.

However, for neurodivergent people the ability to stim openly without fear of judgement can be life changing as it reduces the need to hide or mask parts of yourself that can be exhausting. For LBS, the introduction of stim toys was a low cost, fun, and effective means of creating a neuro-inclusive workplace and a great way to open up conversations about different ways in which people think, communicate, and process information.

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Case Study 2: Working towards neuro-inclusive recruitment and selection at Anchor.

Recruitment and selection processes are a good example where certain agreed upon standards and expectations are put into place that may unknowingly exclude neurodivergent candidates. Time pressures to create job advertisements and organise and hold interviews or assessment activities can mean that the methods used are rarely examined or evaluated. However, some companies are recognising the need to rethink their approach.

BITC member Anchor are currently redesigning their recruitment and selection process with neurodiversity in mind. Teagan Robinson-Bell (Diversity and Inclusion Manager at Anchor) says that using accreditation goals such as the UK government's Disability Confident Scheme are helping to drive neuro-inclusive and disability-friendly improvements across their organisation.

"That's the goal currently and we're looking at recruitment as the first part of the employee life cycle and get that absolutely spot on. Our aim is to take things in stages, so we start with recruitment, then we can look at how people are inducted, how we monitor progression, and why people leave us as well. We are taking a very methodical approach to disability and neurodiversity, but for us it starts with recruitment as this is how our staff first meet us and form their impressions of us."

For Anchor, developing a neuro-inclusive recruitment strategy starts with modest but foundational changes in the way interviews are managed. As Teagan explains:

"From a recruitment perspective we're looking closely at the type of environment that people are interviewing in. The type of questions that are being asked and how appropriate they are. For example, are questions competency based, clear, and straightforward? We are also considering adding interview panel members' LinkedIn profiles into the interview invites so that candidates can have a look at someone's profile and get familiar with their face before they walk into the building."

"We're also putting in place a policy where - if there are going to be stages to an interview - all first interviews must be virtual because for someone who's neurodivergent and who has a disability there are so many factors that intersect with where and how an interview is carried out. For us, virtual interviews address important issues that often get overlooked such as the socio-economic background of our applicants. How expensive it is just to attend an interview. Are you wearing the right clothes? Do you need to go and get a train? So for us, stage one interviews have to be virtual. Just implementing small changes like this actually make a bigger difference overall to the quality of candidates we can select from."

The key to designing any neuro-inclusive recruitment and selection process starts by understanding sensory and cognitive differences and the anxiety and overwhelm that can accompany misleading or poorly designed policies and processes. Instead, a neuro-inclusive approach might include:

- Moving first or initial interviews online
- Providing clear pre-interview instructions and examples of interview questions
- Introducing panel members in advance
- Focussing on competency-based questions that are directly relevant to the role
- Avoiding jargon, excessive small talk, or euphemisms.
- Appointing a neurodiversity and disability recruitment champion to monitor policies and practices.

As Anchor have found, implementing just some of these changes can create a positive experience for everybody while ensuring that the best quality candidates can be identified from larger and more diverse talent pool.

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Making Neurodiversity Part of Your Organisation's culture

To engage with neurodiversity is to include everybody in your organisation. We are all neurodiverse in one way or another.

However, being neuroinclusive requires a deeper understanding of what it feels like to be neurodivergent and recognising how existing ways of organising the workplace might make life unnecessarily challenging.

Autism

For people who are autistic, this could include difficulties navigating the sensory environment, social situations and small talk.

ADHD

For people with ADHD, they may face challenges with executive functioning, such as prioritising information, impulsive decision-making, short-term memory and maintaining consistent focus.

Dyspraxia

For people who are dyspraxic, they may find expected norms around engaging with physical space and object manipulation difficult to cope with.

Dyslexia

For people who are dyslexic, there may be struggles with data processing work and specific requirements when ordering and

exchanging complex written communication.

In each case, the challenge neurodivergent people face is not due to personal deficits, but because of a lack of fit with the working environment and agreed upon expectations and norms. This can result in a feeling of overwhelm and anxiety. A question that senior leaders and managers might consider is whether the design of work environments and related expectations and norms are actually necessary for work to be carried out effectively. Could they be redesigned, improved upon, or even replaced with something more neuro-inclusive?

Reasonable adjustments

One way to approach this is by making **reasonable adjustments** for disabled and neurodivergent employees. Reasonable adjustments are a legal obligation under the Equality Act 2010, an Act of Parliament which includes nine protected characteristics, including disability.

A reasonable adjustment can be defined as the removal or reduction of a disadvantage resulting from somebody's disability. When viewed through the social model of disability, this can be extended to the removal or reduction of any barrier that is actively disabling and that prevents access

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to resources, systems, people, places and spaces that others enjoy and benefit from.

The two case studies above already provide some examples of reasonable adjustments and show that some of these can be low cost and beneficial to everybody. The challenge is often in recognising why somebody might require a reasonable adjustment.

In supporting neurodivergent staff members, it is important to remember that most reasonable adjustments have at their core a need to alleviate sensory overstimulation.

Neuroinclusive reasonable adjustments might involve:

- Changes to the physical environment (lighting levels, temperature, managing excess noise, or providing noise cancelling headphones).
- An adjustment may involve working with line managers and staff to explore alternative work patterns or remote working options.
- It might be recognising and allowing for different modes of communication and different ways of navigating social interaction.

Some reasonable adjustments may require resource investment such as purchasing

specific equipment or assistive software. However, many adjustments, such as changes to work patterns, remote working, or reframing customs and practices around different modes of communication and social interaction should be a minimal cost to the organisation.

Key takeaway

What is important is to recognise your own gaps in knowledge and understanding around neurodiversity and working with neurodivergent staff members to better understand their own lived experience, their needs, and their own ideas and suggestions for what form a reasonable adjustment might take.

After all, neurodivergent staff members are making their own reasonable adjustments every day to fit into a neurotypical world that does not always accommodate their sensory, cognitive, and communication needs. In many ways, they are already experts in accommodations and adjustments, and they probably have lots of ideas and suggestions to share with you. The challenge is for companies to actively include neurodivergent voices and experiences at every level of the organisation, so that they can benefit from this wealth of existing in-house knowledge and expertise.

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Conclusion

Embedding neurodiversity into your organisation's culture is an ongoing process, but it starts by recognising and understanding some of the key experiences and challenges that neurodivergent people face when living in a world that is not designed for them.

It is important, where possible, to involve and include your neurodivergent staff members in any Equality, Diversity, Inclusion (EDI) agendas or strategies.

You could try to set up a neurodiversity staff network. This is something that many BITC members are exploring. This is a network created by and for neurodivergent staff members to provide mutual support and a collective means of advocating for the needs for a neurodivergent workforce at all levels of the organisation.

Networks can be local and in-person or online national or international in scope. Whatever form they take they can provide a company with a key source of knowledge and information that can help to improve awareness and create a foundation for important structural and cultural changes, as well as improvements to policies and everyday work practices that benefit everybody.

Next steps:

- Think about how you might improve your own and your company's knowledge and understanding of neurodiversity. Below are some resources and recommended reading to help get you started.
- Reflect on the language you and your company currently use when discussing disability and neurodiversity. Ask yourself whether this language is inclusive or whether it may be excluding or even potentially discriminatory.
- Try conducting an informal neurodiversity-friendly audit of workspaces, work roles, and work practices to identify areas that may cause sensory overwhelm and clashes with different cognitive and communication styles.
- Make an explicit commitment to promoting a **social model of disability** approach, that informs all other work policies and practices.
- Seek out every opportunity to include neurodivergent staff members, at all levels of the organisation in key policy and strategy decisions around disability

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support, reasonable adjustments and accommodations.

- Appoint a neurodiversity affirming recruitment and selection champion to oversee and monitor recruitment and selection processes and procedures and to identify potential areas of accidental bias or discrimination.
- Consider setting up a neurodiversity staff network run for and by neurodivergent staff members to provide support and guidance for fellow colleagues and to help create a more neurodiversity-friendly organisation.

Useful resources and further reading

- [ADHD Foundation: Neurodiversity in the Workplace: An information guide for employers](#)
- [Business in the Community Supporting Neurodiversity at Work.](#)
- [National Autistic Society Recruitment Guidance](#)
- [Dyspraxia Foundation: Working with Dyspraxia: A hidden asset](#)

Links and further support from BITC

BITC provides support across a wide range of Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) topics, including neurodiversity, offering online resources via our [website](#), [Advisory Services](#) and [webinars and other events](#).

For members, your Relationship Manager or Adviser can help you find support. Non-members can visit our website to find out how to [join us](#).

[Opening Doors: Driving Inclusive Recruitment](#) supports businesses to make their recruitment processes more inclusive.

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APPENDIX

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