



NEURODIVERSITY AT WORK

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Uptimize's mission is to pioneer neurodiversity in the workplace through online learning. Uptimize provides online training tools both for neurodivergent job-seekers, and for employers looking to embrace neurodiversity and become neurodiversity smart. Its training tools are developed through collaboration with global neurodiversity thought leaders, focus groups, and leading employers in the area of neurodiversity at work. Uptimize's clients include Google, Microsoft, and JPMorgan Chase.



1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

9

Guide

Neurodiversity at work

Contents

1	About this guide	2
2	Introduction	3
3	Neurodiversity explained	6
4	Why neurodiversity matters	9
5	Common neurodivergent thinking styles	13
6	Making your people management approach neurodiversity smart	22
7	Building an inclusive, neurodiverse workplace	33
8	Useful resources	42
9	Endnotes	43

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- all those who attended a roundtable event that helped inform the content of this guide.

Please contact us if you have any questions or ideas based on our findings:
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1 About this guide

This guide is for HR professionals and leaders across functions who want to learn more about neurodiversity, the benefits for their organisation, and how they can support neurodivergent people to be comfortable and successful at work.

The guide has two main aims: first, to raise awareness of neurodiversity in the workplace among employers; and second, to inspire more employers to action – to take steps to encourage neurodiverse job applicants, remove potential ‘friction points’ in the hiring process and to support their staff to achieve their potential.

In this guide, you’ll find practical examples from organisations already appreciating the benefits of a neurodiverse workforce and actively supporting their staff. Through our case study research, it’s clear that adjustments made to enable neurodivergent individuals to thrive at work frequently benefit *everyone*. Most are low-cost and easy to implement – and can make a significant difference to an individual’s working life, their potential to contribute to the organisation and to build a lasting career.

This guide provides the starting point for both greater awareness and action. Sections of the guide cover definitions and understanding of neurodiversity as it relates to the workplace, the case for action (and risks of inactivity) and how you can make both your people management approach and workplaces more ‘neurodiversity smart’. There is equal emphasis on the necessary culture change needed for greater understanding and acceptance of neurodiversity – and its value to employers – and tangible action steps that can be taken to create a more inclusive, engaged, and potentially more innovative organisation.

This guide is intended to spur on action from employers to create more inclusive workplaces where neurodivergent individuals can thrive. We hope the practical suggestions in the last two sections are useful as a starting point for action and help develop greater confidence in talking about and embracing neurodiversity at work.

Ed Thompson, CEO, Uptimize

Dr Jill Miller, Policy Adviser, Diversity and Inclusion, CIPD

Note: Scope of this guide

The guide focuses on forms of innate or largely innate neurodivergence, such as autism and ADHD, as they relate to the workplace – where these are, in the words of Nick Walker, *‘intrinsic and pervasive factors in an individual’s psyche, personality, and fundamental way of relating to the world’*.¹ The guide does not specifically cover ‘acquired’ neurodivergence, such as through brain trauma – though many of the same principles of people-centric inclusion are likely to be relevant when including such individuals.

Bipolar disorder, depression, schizophrenia and anxiety are sometimes included under the umbrella of neurodivergence – and/or the umbrella of mental health – and are important to consider in the context of creating an inclusive, effective working environment for employees, but are not specifically covered within this guide.

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Official technical classification in this context is provided by the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders). However, popular terminology can differ from that used in the DSM. At times in this guide, we have included terms that are understood and used in common parlance – for example ‘dyslexia’ – while in the DSM this is categorized as a form of ‘specific learning disability’.

2 Introduction

Neurodiversity is, ultimately, a biological fact of the infinite variety of human neurocognition. Now, the same term ‘neurodiversity’ is also being used to represent a fast-growing sub-category of organisational diversity and inclusion that seeks to embrace and maximise the talents of people who think differently.

‘Neurodiversity may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general. Who can say what form of wiring will be best at any given moment?’

So wrote American journalist Harvey Blume in *The Atlantic* in 1998 – in what is believed to be one of the first uses of the term ‘neurodiversity’ in print.

In the two decades since Blume’s article, the world has slowly caught up with his thinking. Autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia, ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and more – for so long pathologised as medical conditions to be mitigated, and even cured – are now seen as natural forms of human neurocognitive variation. What have been termed the ‘flip side’ strengths of neurodivergent individuals – from problem-solving, to creative insights and visual spatial thinking – are belatedly being recognised. Similarly, thanks to the ‘social model’ of disability, the realisation has grown that many of the challenges that have previously defined and stereotyped neurodivergent individuals are the result of navigating societies – and workplaces – shaped solely for ‘neurotypicals’.

The social model of disability

The charity Scope explains: *‘The social model of disability says that disability is caused by the way society is organised, rather than by a person’s impairment or difference. It looks at ways of removing barriers that restrict life choices for disabled people. When barriers are removed, disabled people can be independent and equal in society, with choice and control over their own lives.*

‘Disabled people developed the social model of disability because the traditional medical model did not explain their personal experience of disability or help to develop more inclusive ways of living.’²

Fast-moving employers are taking steps to include neurodivergent people now – a group that likely represents more than 10% of the population, and thus in many cases a significant proportion of job applicants, customers, and existing staff. What do Microsoft, JPMorgan, EY, Google, SAP, DXC Technology, Ford and Amazon have in common? Answer: they are all running neurodiversity-at-work initiatives, or are developing one.



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Pioneer organisations in this area have demonstrated early successes. JPMorgan, for example, reports that *'after three to six months working in the Mortgage Banking Technology division, autistic workers were doing the work of people who took three years to ramp up – and were even 50 percent more productive'*.³ Walgreens have seen turnover costs plummet through their much-admired disability hiring initiatives.⁴ At DXC Technology, whose pioneering 'Dandelion' programme in Australia has become a model for others to follow, managers report about neurodivergent hires, *'They've actually helped sharpen up some of the thought processes amongst the teams.'*⁵ Rajesh Anandan, CEO of software testing company ULTRA Testing, which employs a significant number of autistic people, says he has put his testers up against other firms and their skills have been proven to be superior – ULTRA, a start-up, has tripled revenues in the past two years and is already operating profitably.

Neurodiversity is moving up the organisation agenda for two reasons. With the business case for diversity as a whole now accepted, organisations aiming to be truly inclusive employers cannot exclude such a significant demographic as the neurodivergent. To continue doing so risks missing out on talent, and compromising on productivity and customer trust. More pertinently, the business case for diversity has highlighted the importance of 'diversity of thought' – get people with different perspectives, backgrounds and experiences in a room, and your team will be more innovative and creative. In a sense, neurodiversity may be one of the most challenging areas within diversity and inclusion – complex, nuanced, and often invisible – yet it offers a business upside in this context: given that neurodivergent people *literally think differently*.

'A lack of awareness and understanding has led to hiring processes, management practices and workspaces being designed only with neurotypicals in mind.'

Including people who are neurodivergent requires a conscious effort on the part of employers. The social model of disability posits that disabilities must be seen in the context of their environment – in this case, it's not hard to see how, for example, conventional interviews could be particularly challenging for an autistic job applicant, a messy spreadsheet could be problematic for certain dyslexic individuals, or static, rote work might not suit an ADHDer. Neurodivergent people have a range of challenges that may make aspects of the workplace uncomfortable, or certain tasks harder to pick up or more problematic.

However, speak to pioneers at Microsoft and SAP and they'll tell you this: neurodiversity inclusion can be done, and the upside hugely outweighs the time and effort to adjust workspaces and work processes to be inclusive to people with alternative thinking styles. Adjustments are frequently easy to implement and inexpensive – employers surveyed by the US Job Accommodation Network found that as many as 59% of common adjustment types cost *nothing* for the employer. Technology, in particular assistive tech in the form of iPad apps such as speech-to-text software, is facilitating both the inclusion and performance optimisation of neurodivergent people such as non-verbal autistic people and dyslexic people.

Thomas Armstrong, author of *The Power of Neurodiversity*, argues that while as a society we have learned to reject a throw-away culture, employers often continue to unintentionally exclude or discard great talent. Widespread lack of neurodiversity inclusion amongst organisations up to now – and the collective missing out on the benefits it can provide – is likely to have been caused by a number of factors. One is a



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typical focus on ‘generalists’ – an approach now challenged by those employers seeking innovation ‘from the edges’ by deliberately building (neuro)diverse teams. Second, a lack of awareness and understanding has led to hiring processes, management practices and workspaces being designed only with neurotypicals in mind. As an example, the orthodoxy of the open plan office may have benefits for some in terms of collaboration and a perception of flat hierarchy, but it can be problematic, too, for those with specific sensory sensitivities.

We live in an age where HR priorities are becoming CEO priorities – where corporate goals the world over focus on talent and innovation. Creativity is key, not only to thrive, but to survive – with the average lifespan of a company down to 15 years⁶ (down 78% in less than a century), the fear of disruption is real. Machines, too, are disrupting the working world as a whole – taking over rote and ever more sophisticated tasks, across many industries. To be successful, organisations must find ways to include the best information processors, the best creative thinkers.

Ray Coyle, chief executive of Auticon UK, reports that many autistic people have a more ‘spikey’ skills profile than non-autistic people. They may have outstanding, unique abilities in specific areas, but in turn find other aspects more difficult. *‘For the majority of people, their intelligence profile maps out as a wavy line, being higher on the graph for those who score an overall higher IQ. However, we find the intelligence profile of our autistic colleagues tends to be more “spikey”, as there are things they do exceptionally well. Employers need to get better at making the most of what people are good at and make role adjustments for the things they’re not as good at. That’s how you get the best from talented people. Essentially, to get at the things people are great at, we need to stop focusing on what people aren’t good at!’*

In rugby, American football, and most sports, teams are deliberately built based on difference, not uniformity. Efforts are made to include the fastest runner, the highest jumper, and the best kicker – and to blend these unique and specific strengths into the effective whole of the team. Employers – with a historic focus on generalists – should consider a similar approach. Talent is key – and success comes from constructing teams that strengthen the organisation as a whole.

‘The new focus on and understanding of neurodiversity is already having a wider impact, beyond the immediate benefits for neurodivergent employees.’

Within an article in *Marketing Week*,⁷ Mark Evans, director of marketing at Direct Line and a neurodiversity-at-work advocate, talks about the pressures on the modern marketer to be both ‘right brained’ – creative, insightful – and ‘left brained’ – proficient with data, analytics, and demonstrating ROI. Yet successful marketing departments, says Evans, will be those that realise that not all of those skills need to be contained within each employee – in his words, *‘Everyone’s brains are wired differently. It’s marketing as a whole that needs to be whole-brained’*. EY’s approach reflects similar thinking; their autism hiring programme is delivering talent for a new ‘account support associate’ role, where individuals provide data analysis and insights for their customer-facing colleagues.⁸



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The new focus on and understanding of neurodiversity is already having a wider impact, beyond the immediate benefits for neurodivergent employees. Even programmes that have initially been focused on better inclusion of a specific neurodivergent demographic have reported wider benefits – most notably, a culture change in the way the organisation thinks about all employees. Once we accept that we are all different, each with our own strengths and challenges, perspectives change. How do we create a workplace in which the whole spectrum of our team can be productive? And how do we hire so that we attract every bit of potential talent that can add value at our organisation? SAP’s metaphor to elicit change across their organisation is that people are not uniform but are, like puzzle pieces, irregularly shaped.

In their *Harvard Business Review* article, Austin and Pisano (2017)⁹ quote the firm’s chief diversity and inclusion officer, Anka Wittenberg, as saying, ‘*Innovation ... is most likely to come from parts of us that we don’t all share.*’ This philosophy is precipitating a new model of management – one that accepts and embraces differences in the team from the outset, and that works to accommodate, combine and leverage diverse thinking styles for collective success.

Steve Silberman, author of *NeuroTribes: The legacy of autism and the future of neurodiversity*, has told *Wired* magazine that ‘*honoring and nurturing neurodiversity is civilization’s best chance to thrive in an uncertain future.*’

Might the same be true for organisations?

3 Neurodiversity explained

‘*We need to admit that there is no standard brain,*’ wrote Thomas Armstrong in his pivotal work *The Power of Neurodiversity*. The term neurodiversity, indeed, refers to the infinite range of differences in individual human brain function and behavioural traits.

As Armstrong points out, humans have tended to use significantly more positive language when discussing cultural diversity or biodiversity than when discussing neurodiversity. Instead, negative and medicalised language has dominated the lexicon – witness the very terms ‘autism spectrum *disorder*’ and the double negative in ‘ADHD’.

What’s known as the ‘neurodiversity paradigm’ has helped reframe how neurodivergence is understood and talked about – highlighting common strengths as well as challenges, recognising the significant variation even within a specifically understood demographic such as ‘dyspraxic’ or ‘autistic’, and presenting neurodiversity as a natural form of human diversity. The progress of changing societal understanding and attitudes has been slow – it’s shocking to note that as recently as the 1970s, homosexuality was considered a mental disorder in the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders).

Other cultural forces have to this point often been limiting factors to our understanding and appreciation of neurodiversity. The common simile of a human brain is that of a machine – one that is either ‘fixed’ or ‘broken’, with an implicit ‘right’ way to operate. Meanwhile, the IQ test – ubiquitous and barely challenged for 100 years – reflects a



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popular conception that human intelligence is fixed, on a linear scale. In the 1980s, Harvard professor Howard Gardner argued, instead, that we may be better off thinking of each of us as having ‘multiple intelligences’ – including visual-spatial, interpersonal, logical, musical and kinaesthetic. Gardner’s ‘MI’ theory has since been given support and validation from more recent neuroscientific studies that demonstrate that such functions relate to different parts of the brain.¹⁰ It may be better, then, to think of human neurocognitive styles as operating across multiple continuums of competence – rather than on single lines such as between ‘able’ and ‘disabled’, or between ‘less intelligent’ and ‘more intelligent’.

When we describe people as ‘neurodivergent’, then, we are talking about people who in one or several respects have a thinking style at the edges of one or more of these continuums, with – in the words of autistic author, speaker and educator Nick Walker – a brain *‘that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of “normal”’*.¹¹ Previously, society has tended to treat these alternative thinking styles as disorders – conditions diagnosed most often in childhood, by a deficit model – focusing on what the child struggles with, when compared with their peers. This has led, unsurprisingly, to a preoccupation with finding ways to help the neurodivergent individual better ‘fit in’ – effectively, to act and function as closely as possible to a ‘neurotypical’, in what are societies shaped only for the latter. There has been much less focus or appreciation on the true and often unique capabilities of such individuals, who though they may struggle with one task type, can excel in others.

‘To be neurodiversity smart, firms should strive to develop a language and acceptance of neuro-difference, and to celebrate and leverage neurodiverse strengths while taking steps to accommodate - and not belittle - any specific challenges that an individual may face.’

Part of neurodiversity’s rise to prominence has been the challenge to this orthodoxy from well-known, successful neurodivergent people themselves. Dyslexia and ADHD, for example, are shown to be overrepresented amongst entrepreneurs, a result perhaps of their frequent capacity for innovative, visionary thinking. Such entrepreneurs, such as Richard Branson, have changed the discussion around neurodiversity by talking proudly of their neurodivergence, seeing it as a help – not a hindrance. In a well-publicised letter to a 9-year-old girl with dyslexia, Branson wrote that *‘being dyslexic is actually an advantage and has helped me greatly in life’*.¹² David Neeleman – ADHDer and founder of Jet Blue Airways – has said he would refuse a magic pill to become ‘neurotypical’, such have been the benefits his ADHD has provided him in business. *‘Look at the positives...,’* Neeleman told Inc.com. *‘Just keep thinking about the good side of ADD, the creativity and the originality it can stimulate.’*¹³

Add to Branson and Neeleman others such as Steve Jobs, IKEA founder Ingvar Kamprad, and *Dragons’ Den* stars Duncan Bannatyne and Theo Paphitis, and it’s clear that people with thinking styles ‘at the edges’ can achieve great things. Historical figures from Mozart to Andy Warhol, Thomas Jefferson, Emily Dickinson and Bernard Montgomery may also have been neurodivergent in some way. Such individuals may experience individual challenges uncommon to neurotypicals – but they can also possess unique abilities akin to human ‘superpowers’ – abilities that can contribute to a competitive advantage when properly appreciated and leveraged by neurodiversity smart employers.



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To be neurodiversity smart, firms should strive to develop a language and acceptance of neuro-difference, and to celebrate and leverage neurodiverse strengths while taking steps to accommodate – and not belittle – any specific challenges that an individual may face. In many cases, as we'll see later in the guide, taking steps to be inclusive of neurodivergent people will often result in 'universal accommodations' – adjustments that benefit all employees, job-seekers, or customers. It's worth noting that such adjustments can expand and enhance existing provision for disability inclusion in the workplace: often this has focused on more visible disabilities, and less on neurodivergent individuals. Better awareness of neurodiversity means HR can now ensure that proactive adjustments to workspaces and internal processes result in *truly* universal benefits.

Suggested terminology

Definitions relating to neurodiversity are contentious and not uniform. Here we provide 'working definitions' to help develop the neurodiversity conversation in the workplace along consistent – and not confused – lines. These represent Uptimize's own – current – working language, inspired and guided by its advisers and in particular neurodiversity advocate Nick Walker, who has provided the basis for many of the accepted 'definitions' in the neurodiversity sphere in his influential blog, Neurocosmopolitanism.¹⁴

Such definitions may be subject to modifications over time because of changing cultural perspectives, or through patterns of popular usage. Most important in practical terms is likely to be the spirit of the endeavour – a good-faith effort to use inclusive terms and act (whether as the organisation, or as an individual team member) in an inclusive way. Taking this approach is likely to be most important – especially as the terms and lexicon around this topic remain fluid.

Neurodiversity: the biological reality of infinite variation in human neurocognitive functioning and behaviour, akin to 'biodiversity' in the natural world. The term 'neurodiversity' is now also being used to describe the fast-emerging sub-category of workplace diversity and inclusion that focuses on including people who are neurodivergent.

The neurodiversity paradigm: a perspective on neurodiversity that suggests neurodiversity is the result of natural human variation, and that there is no one 'normal' brain type. Stands in contrast to the highly medicalised perspective (until recently, the dominant perspective globally) that views autism, ADHD and others as 'disorders' to be treated.

Neurodivergent: having cognitive functioning different from what is seen as 'normal' – while the term appears to reflect the 'medical model' above, it is a term that most neurodivergent people are comfortable with. In this guide we focus on neurodivergence that is largely or entirely genetic or innate – such as dyslexia – other forms of neurodivergence can be acquired, such as via an incidence of brain trauma.

Neurodivergence: the state of being neurodivergent. It's worth noting that a common misuse of language is to talk of 'an individual's neurodiversity' – better would be 'an individual's neurodivergence'.

Neurodiverse: this term is often used instead of 'neurodivergent', yet is potentially problematic (akin, perhaps, to referring to an African-Caribbean person as 'racially diverse'). A group can be neurodiverse – an individual is likely better described as neurodivergent.

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Neurotypical: given the biological fact that there is no such thing as a ‘normal’ brain, neurotypical is best thought of as ‘not neurodivergent’ – that is, within parameters of neurocognitive style that have not been either medically defined as ‘disorders’ or culturally defined as ‘neurodivergent’. It’s important not to draw simple lines in the sand between ‘neurotypicals’ and neurodivergent people – human neurodiversity is a highly complex spectrum, in which everyone sits.

Neurominority: a group such as autistic people, or dyslexic people, defined by sharing a similar form of innate neurodivergence. There is invariably great variety within each neurominority demographic.

4 Why neurodiversity matters

Neurodiversity, as a term and as a category of diversity and inclusion in the workplace, may appear to an HR manager to have ‘come out of nowhere’. However, there are a number of factors behind its sudden prominence – factors that explain why organisations globally, and across multiple industry sectors, are now taking steps to be neurodiversity smart.

The growing body of prevalence data surrounding autism, dyslexia, and ADHD has increased global awareness of neurodiversity. Most notably, more diagnoses of autism – according to Autism Speaks, a 600% increase in two decades in the United States¹⁵ – has led to widespread political and media coverage, and concerns of an ‘epidemic’. In the US in particular, the apparent prevalence of ADHD has continued to increase rapidly during the same time period. Research has challenged the idea of ‘epidemics’, suggesting growing prevalence is due to changing reporting and diagnostic practices.¹⁶ Regardless, it is now widely accepted that neurominorities represent in total a large percentage of the overall population, likely greater than 10%. For organisations, this means that more than one in ten job applicants, existing staff and customers are likely neurodivergent in some way.

Organisations such as Microsoft with prominent neurodiversity programmes – such firms already span industries from professional services, to automotive and government – are themselves, through their actions, raising the prominence of neurodiversity as a category for HR managers to engage with. When Microsoft and others hire neurodivergent people in front-line roles, it’s a clear statement that such organisations have already recognised that building neurodiverse teams can be a competitive advantage and is part of being a responsible employer.

Given the overall prevalence of neurodivergent people, there are clear risks of not taking steps to ensure inclusion. What will it cost you not to get the most out of your employees in terms of productivity, or to lose talent to more inclusive, attractive employers? What will it mean for your product innovation to miss out on the ‘diversity of thought’ that neurodiversity can deliver, and that other firms are setting themselves up to benefit from? And what might not understanding the needs of your customers cost in terms of lost revenue, and even brand reputation?

Be aware that a person’s neurodivergence may be regarded as a disability under the Equality Act 2010. The Equality Act defines disability as a *‘physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on your ability to carry out normal*



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day-to-day activities'. Firms are obliged, under the Equality Act 2010, to *'make sure workers with disabilities, or physical or mental health conditions, aren't substantially disadvantaged when doing their jobs'*.¹⁷ This means employers need to take consideration of reasonable adjustments seriously. Visit the gov.uk website to find out more about your obligations as an employer.

The full benefits of neurodiversity inclusion are still being explored and understood – but it's increasingly clear that this can have benefits both internal and external. Early programmes are beginning to produce enticing, positive data – longer-term initiatives are now getting interest and recognition. One clear advantage is in attracting new talent – talent that has been substantially overlooked.

Case study 1: JPMorgan Chase

'Many autistic people are simply brilliant people – highly educated, highly capable, detail-oriented, yet unemployed,' says James Mahoney, Executive Director and Head of Autism at Work for JPMorgan Chase. Shocked to find out the true scale of the unemployment of autistic people, Mahoney and his firm saw opportunity: to recruit from a largely untapped pool of talent. *'Because of our size and continued growth, we have an almost constant need for talented employees – especially in technology-related fields,'* he continues. Mahoney, having created JPMorgan Chase's autism hiring programme, is now scaling it across the company. The initiative is giving new opportunities for people like Jon, a quality assurance analyst, who describes his strongest attribute as being the ability to assess situations and come up with the best possible solutions in order to make them more organised and more efficient. *'I would encourage anyone on the spectrum to embrace what makes them different and see it as their greatest strength,'* he said. *'I firmly believe that companies could always benefit from having employees who see things in an unconventional way, which is something to remember any time an individual on the spectrum is seeking a job.'*

Only 16% of autistic adults in the UK are in full-time employment, according to the National Autistic Society. However, their research also shows that a significant majority (77%) of unemployed autistic people say they want to work.¹⁸ In addition, comments from dyslexic, dyspraxic and dyscalculic individuals show how they could contribute far more at work with just simple accommodations and understanding. These demographics represent, as a whole, a vast, high-potential available talent pool for organisations to tap into and leverage.

A well-known *Forbes* article from 2014, 'ADHD: The entrepreneur's superpower',¹⁹ cited ADHDer traits as including ability to focus for extended periods, multitasking and being calm under pressure: all valuable skills for employees within organisations, not just when starting a company. The capacity of dyslexic and dyspraxic people to 'think outside the box' – often a much-desired quality of an individual employee, or team – is also highly valuable. Autistic people, too, are proven to be successful in a variety of roles, often bringing strengths to their work such as analytical thinking, focus, and attention to detail. In the words of one autistic employee at SAP's Autism at Work programme, data analyst Raphael Vivas, *'people on the spectrum come with a diverse set of skills and interest and have a lot of prowess in a whole range of fields.'*²⁰



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In a sense, greater awareness of neurodiversity – and of its potential – comes at a perfect time for employers struggling with the costs and competition of the ‘war for talent’. Manpower Group estimate global talent shortages are at their most acute since 2007, with 40% of employers globally struggling to fill open positions.²¹ This is putting pressure on the C-suite – and in particular HR – to address skills gaps and plan for the long term.

The Dandelion Program, started at HP/DXC Technology Australia in 2014, aims to integrate autistic people into DXC’s workforce. New hires recruited through the programme are performing work in areas such as testing, analytics, IT operations, and cyber security; DXC has also run ‘Dandelion work experience programmes’ to give potential employees of the future a taste of life at the firm. *‘The Dandelion Program is about building a sustainable work environment and careers for people on the autism spectrum,’* said Michael Fieldhouse, Director, Emerging Businesses and Cyber Security at DXC and the lead executive behind the programme. *‘The long-term vision of the Dandelion Program is broken up into two elements – one, for us to build a competitive advantage by accessing this talent, and two, for us to allow the learnings we have created through this programme to be open-sourced.’* DXC has now partnered with Uptimize to include some of the trainings and learnings developed through the programme so far into Uptimize’s online neurodiversity training tools.

Less well understood – but exciting – is the potential for neurodiverse teams to work together to deliver greater performance and innovation. Diversity consultant Susan Woods, of Henderson Woods, writes: *‘Diversity of thought is fundamental to understanding the power of diversity and inclusion. It’s what creates learning, stimulates the possibility of innovation and actively demonstrates respect.’*²² What happens when you deliberately construct teams with outstanding abilities in areas such as data analysis, or creative and visionary thinking? Equally, understanding and appreciating neurodiversity is likely to benefit co-worker collaboration. Without this, when new teams form, often there can be a lengthy and cloudy ‘getting to know you’ stage as team members try to develop a shared pattern of work and communication channels that sync with their individual thinking styles and preferences.

ULTRA Testing is a successful software testing company that has, from its inception, hired a substantial proportion of autistic workers. At ULTRA, new employees – neurodivergent or not – are given a guide to the rest of the team, called the BioDeck – featuring 28 data points on each individual, including preferences of communication channels. Thus, when a new team begins to collaborate at ULTRA, the neurodiversity of this team is already acknowledged – this can then be more quickly leveraged into productive work.

Neurodiversity initiatives can help to create a more neurodiversity-aware culture in which existing neurodivergent staff feel more comfortable in disclosing, and seeking reasonable adjustments to help them be successful in their work. This offers the opportunity for HR to



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boost both engagement and productivity amongst the existing employee base. Meanwhile, proactive adjustments to workplaces, workspaces, hiring processes and management practices can benefit all employees – from rules on noise and interruptions in the office, to clearer job descriptions and a more inclusive approach to introducing change affecting an individual employee or a team.

Benefits can be external, too, beyond the team and work environment. Given the prevalence of neurodivergence, it's likely to be smart to ensure customer-facing staff have sufficient awareness to take a 'moment of pause' to consider neurodiversity across all potential customer interfaces. While this is likely to vary significantly by industry, key principles remain: even greater clarity of communication, providing information in multiple formats, and making clear that your organisation welcomes neurodiverse customers are all likely to boost customer engagement and customer trust. This has the potential to broaden your potential customer base as well as solidify customer relationships and the loyalty of existing clients.

'While neurodivergent people may face their own, specific challenges in the workplace environment, or with particular tasks, they can bring unique and valuable strengths to their work.'

Other external benefits are likely to be at brand level: studies have shown customers prefer socially inclusive companies, and so do job-seekers – in particular, millennials, who will comprise close to three-quarters of the global workforce by 2025.²³ The 2016 Cone Communications Millennial Employee Engagement Study found that just under two-thirds of millennials consider a company's social and environmental commitments when deciding where to work – and 64% only wish to work for an employer with strong corporate social responsibility (CSR) values.

All the above demonstrates why neurodiversity is fast becoming one of the key aspects of workplace diversity and inclusion as we enter 2018. For too long, neurodiversity has been poorly understood, stereotyped, and even ignored – thinking styles such as dyslexia or autism have been characterised only by deficits. As a result, in the workplace, people within these neurominorities have at best been included only within broader disability inclusion initiatives, where accommodations have often focused on the more visible challenges of physically disabled employees.

Now that neurodiversity is better understood as the reality of natural variation in human neurocognition, it's time to take a more balanced – and more optimistic – view. While neurodivergent people may face their own, specific challenges in the workplace environment, or with particular tasks, they can bring unique and valuable strengths to their work. The potential for organisations to build a greater understanding of people's neuro-differences – and to find ways of attracting and optimising the full range of human perspectives – seems limitless. Neurodiversity inclusion is an area where 'doing good' is clearly good business.



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5 Common neurodivergent thinking styles

Introduction

While group reference terms such as ‘autistic’ and ‘dyslexic’ are often helpful – and embraced by individuals with these thinking styles – it’s important to note that no two people are alike. Often, an entire neurodivergent demographic is inaccurately stereotyped, with generalisations made across the whole group: for example that autistic people do not enjoy social interaction, or that ADHDers cannot focus.

When sweeping away such stereotypes, it’s important not to then replace them with further generalisations – in the case of autism, for example, there is often significant gender difference in terms of characteristics and behaviours. In a well-known saying popularised by autistic author, speaker and thought leader Stephen Shore, *‘if you’ve met one person with autism, you’ve met one person with autism.’*

In the case of each generally accepted ‘neurominority’, though, there are characteristics and behaviours, strengths and challenges of the thinking style that are common – if not universal – and that are experienced in different ways and to varying extents. Be aware too that there is significant co-occurrence between, for example, dyslexia and dyspraxia: a dyslexic person may also be dyspraxic. In this section, we provide a high-level summary of some of the most common forms of neurodivergence as they relate to the workplace.

Caution about ‘labelling’

Although labels such as ‘autistic’ are often helpful in terms of personal and group identity and workplace accommodations, there is also a danger of drawing ‘lines in the sand’ between neurotypicals and neurominorities. It’s important, first, to remember we all have unique brains – there is no such thing as ‘neuronormal’ – and that neurotypicals, as part of the wider human spectrum of neurodiversity, will often have very strong crossover in their own thinking style with people who are neurodivergent.

No two people are alike

There is also a valid question as to the relevance and appropriateness of ‘labels’ such as ‘autistic’ or ‘dyspraxic’ given the danger of ‘putting people in boxes’ – especially as neurodivergence is infinitely varied, and co-occurrence between forms of neurodivergence is common. However, these terms remain in common usage and popular understanding, and are often important reference points for self-identity. As a result, it’s important for HR to be familiar with some of the most common forms of neurodivergence, while at all times remembering Shore’s point that no two people are alike – and avoiding simplistic labelling.

It’s worth noting too that many people who are neurodivergent may not have had a formal diagnosis – this may be the case in particular for older people, women, and those from ethnic minorities. For organisations, this means there is a chance that there are (significantly) more neurodivergent people within the existing employee base than might



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currently be thought. As a result, neurodiversity-at-work programmes have the potential not only to deliver greater inclusion, but also for some staff (under, of course, no pressure) to find out more about themselves, and develop new strategies for being more productive and comfortable at work.

Autism as it relates to the workplace

What is autism?

'Autism spectrum disorders' are characterised in the DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) as forms of a developmental disability characterised by rigid thinking, restrictive and repetitive behaviours, and social communication challenges. Most people on the autism spectrum also experience some form of sensory sensitivity due to functional hyper-connectivity across multiple brain regions, which, when experienced, may make the individual prone to feeling overwhelmed and anxious.

For too long autism has tended to be defined only in negative terms, with a focus solely on the challenges people face. However, the neurodiversity paradigm – and the successes of autistic people in the workplace – is helping to change this. Autism, like other forms of neurodivergence, may be more constructively viewed not as a 'disorder' but as a neuroprocessing style that results in a fundamentally different experience of the world.

Neurodiversity and autism are separate from mental health – yet it's also important to be aware that anxiety disorders are common among autistic people:²⁴ likely caused in part by the challenges of navigating a neurotypical world.

While the DSM itself no longer includes the terms 'Asperger's syndrome' and 'high' and 'low' functioning, these terms are commonly used to describe individuals as sitting along a linear 'autism spectrum' of capabilities – from individuals who are non-verbal, and who may require greater assistance in their daily life, to those who ('Aspergians') are comparatively closer to neurotypicals in language processing and social interaction capabilities.

'Asperger's' is still included as a term in the WHO's ICD-10 classification. Some individuals who have received a diagnosis of Asperger's strongly identify with this term – and may resent its removal from the DSM-5.

However, these 'functional labels', as they are known, can also be problematic. Not only do they position autism as a medical condition, rather than as a naturally different way of thinking and experiencing the world, they also risk denigrating the abilities and potential of, for example, non-verbal autistic people, many of whom are smart and capable of productive work when supported via suitable accommodations such as assistive tech. It may be better, then, to think of the 'autism spectrum' as less of a linear spectrum and more as a 360-degree range of individuals, each with their own unique combination of characteristics, strengths and challenges.

What proportion of people are autistic?

One in 68 young people are now diagnosed autistic, with many more likely to be living without a diagnosis. The generally accepted ratio is 4:1 male-to-female, but recent research suggests there may be more undiagnosed women than undiagnosed men.



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Well-known ‘autistic’ people include Daryl Hannah, Dan Aykroyd, Temple Grandin, Emily Dickinson (assumed), and Thomas Jefferson (assumed).

Common strengths at work

Typical strengths associated with autistic people at work include problem-solving and analytical thinking. Autistic people tend to be very logical thinkers, with a bottom-up, data-driven thinking style free from confirmation bias. Some have a strong ability to focus and concentrate for long periods of time. Autistic people often have an exceptional ability to assimilate and retain detailed information – and this aptitude for acquiring detailed knowledge and specialist skills can result in highly specific interest and technical ability in a specific work area. They can also find huge intrinsic enjoyment and satisfaction from working on tasks and projects that they find engaging, sometimes when such work syncs with their own personal (often, deep) interests. Along with other skills and talents, autistic people frequently prove themselves punctual, reliable, dedicated and loyal employees.

‘Certainly, some autistic people are likely to be outstanding in very technical roles, yet this is a narrow perception – for organisations looking to include and develop autistic people, the focus should be much broader.’

Potential challenges at work

Autistic people may find elements of social interaction challenging. Some individuals are non-verbal, requiring assistive tech to communicate – others may experience social challenges through finding it hard to ‘read’ other people, and thinking literally: this can be challenging when colleagues use jargon, or metaphors. Because of potential challenges with eye contact, tone of voice, shyness and social anxiety, some autistic people may appear to colleagues as aloof, unfriendly, or even ‘weird’. Often, however, autistic people *do* want to socialise and be included – they may just be anxious and unsure of how to proceed in this area.

Some autistic people may find conceptualising and illustrating abstract ideas difficult, and they may struggle with adapting to changes in structure and routine. Over-stimulation in a busy, noisy workplace can also be a factor that prevents people from performing at their best at work.

Autistic people at work are thriving in multiple roles

Autistic people represent a wide range of thinking styles, interests, strengths and challenges. Steve Silberman, in his book *NeuroTribes: The legacy of autism and the future of neurodiversity*, writes of the correlation between autism and Silicon Valley, which should be celebrated. However, there is a (false) stereotype of autistic people as brilliant but asocial web developers and software engineers: high on IQ, lower on emotional intelligence, or ‘EQ’. Contrary to the stereotype, autistic people often feel deep emotions and empathy; they may just find it harder to express these feelings than neurotypicals.

Certainly, some autistic people are likely to be outstanding in very technical roles, yet this is a narrow perception – for organisations looking to include and develop autistic people, the focus should be much broader. Autistic people are hugely varied; Temple Grandin, the famous autistic businesswoman, author, and advocate, has identified at least three sub-groups of thinking styles within the autistic demographic – visual thinkers,



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pattern thinkers, and verbal thinkers who excel with words. Grandin herself successfully harnessed her own visual-spatial abilities in roles designing modern facilities for the livestock handling industry.

Given this substantial variation, there's a danger of HR thinking in terms of 'suitable roles' for autistic people – as this could draw a line where none is necessary. It's critical, in particular, to beware stereotypes that autistic people can't have jobs with social skills – many examples, from autistic salespeople to librarians, disprove this.

Dyslexia as it relates to the workplace

Understanding dyslexia

Dyslexia is defined by the British Dyslexic Association (BDA) as a lifelong specific learning difficulty that mainly affects the development of literacy and language-related skills, characterised by difficulties with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory, processing speed, and the automatic development of skills that may not match up to an individual's other cognitive abilities.

While it is well known that dyslexia can lead to challenges, typically less attention has been given to the advantages of this thinking style. Indeed, the BDA stress that the more complex signalling within the brains of dyslexic people – and others with related forms of neurodivergence – have been shown to lead to significant strengths such as creative thought, insight and atypical problem-solving.

'Dyslexic brains function differently from nondyslexic ones not because they're defective but because they're organised to display different kinds of strengths,' write Drs Brock and Fernette Eide in the ground-breaking 2012 book *The Dyslexic Advantage*. In keeping with the neurodiversity paradigm of viewing such 'conditions' as natural human variations, they argue that dyslexia needs to be understood as something broader, more nuanced, and more inherent to an individual's identity than the hitherto prevailing orthodoxy of dyslexia as a reading disorder. *'Dyslexia,'* they write, *'is a reflection of an entirely different pattern of brain organisation and information processing – one that predisposes a person to important abilities along with the well-known challenges.'*

'While it is well known that dyslexia can lead to challenges, typically less attention has been given to the advantages of this thinking style.'

What proportion of people are dyslexic?

At least one in ten people are thought to be dyslexic. Famous dyslexic people include Richard Branson, Steven Spielberg, Keira Knightley and Mohammad Ali.

Common strengths at work

Dyslexic people are famed for general inventiveness and creativity – witness the famous artists from Da Vinci to Picasso and Warhol, who are all thought to have been dyslexic. In the workplace, their unique thinking style can be highly valuable – dyslexic people can excel at pattern-spotting, useful when working with complex datasets or within fast-moving markets. The dyslexic brain lends itself to a big picture view that can help see the wood for the trees, while more 'bottom-up' thinkers may be focused on the latter. Dyslexic people are also known for powerful qualitative reasoning – what we tend to term 'insight' – very valuable where existing data is limited.



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Creativity and big picture thinking are likely key factors in the extraordinary link between dyslexia and entrepreneurship.²⁵ Other notable traits of dyslexic people may also contribute to this – such as an ability to create a vision through visual narrative thinking and then use this vision to inspire others through powerful storytelling. Dyslexic people may also be comfortable with risk-taking, and – like other neurominorities – may also have developed resourcefulness and problem-solving skills from having to navigate a world shaped largely for neurotypicals.

‘Creativity and big picture thinking are likely key factors in the extraordinary link between dyslexia and entrepreneurship.’

Potential challenges at work

The same thinking style that can bring such valuable insight and ‘out of the box thinking’ can also present challenges to dyslexic people. While dyslexic people often have highly desirable strengths, they often also face challenges with a weaker working memory, which can manifest as issues with personal organisation.

While it’s a false stereotype to suggest dyslexic people cannot read effectively, they may experience challenges when needing to read or write quickly in the workplace. The British Dyslexia Association in the UK have produced a style guide for documents which enables everyone to read faster and more accurately.²⁶

As dyslexia is often particularly subtle and ‘hidden’, dyslexic people may be particularly at risk of unempathetic, dismissive or even hostile opinions from co-workers or managers, who may see them as ineffective or even lazy. A dyslexic employee who discloses their dyslexia under such pressure – termed ‘reactive’ disclosure – may risk co-workers seeing this as an ‘excuse’ for performance issues. Dyslexia and neurodiversity awareness training – and a culture that encourages ‘proactive’ disclosure – should help to avoid this.

Some dyslexic people may experience sensory sensitivity, for example from bright overhead lights. This can be easily remedied with better lighting and a coloured reading panel. They may also experience headaches from reading or another form of sustained fine-detail processing. Given the lack of awareness and empathy towards dyslexia that they may have experienced and may continue to experience, frustration and mental health issues such as stress and anxiety are also common.

Simple inclusion strategies can support dyslexic people at work

Simple inclusion measures and workplace adjustments can help remove barriers for dyslexic people at work. These can include training – both awareness training for colleagues and managers, and training for dyslexic employees themselves to recognise and potentially address any areas for personal development. This can be complemented with the introduction of clear, organisation-wide neurodiversity-aware policies and procedures, and an awareness of potential individual accommodations as well as willingness to provide these.

A strong example of dyslexia inclusion comes from Deloitte, where employees with dyslexia are offered a variety of forms of support – including access both to an occupational health colleague and a private internal network where dyslexic people can share challenges, tips, and resources. Dyslexic employees at the firm are also given access to mind-mapping software, dictation tools, and further resources to help them be comfortable at work and optimise their performance.²⁷



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Dyspraxia as it relates to the workplace

Understanding dyspraxia

Dyspraxia UK define dyspraxia (or Developmental Co-ordination Disorder) as ‘a complex neurological condition, which affects muscle co-ordination and perception. Perception includes vision, hearing and proprioception, or the awareness of where your limbs are in space.’²⁸ Diagnoses of dyspraxia are based on the individual concerned showing fine and/or gross motor performance behaviour that is significantly lower than what would be expected, taking into account their age and other attributes. It was once known as ‘clumsy child syndrome’, and is also known as Developmental Co-ordination Disorder, or DCD.

Dyspraxia can be similar to and is often combined with dyslexia, with research suggesting that 52% of children with dyslexia have features of dyspraxia.²⁹ Unlike dyslexia, dyspraxia can cause clumsiness, and poor hand-eye co-ordination.

As with autism, dyslexia and others, dyspraxia has typically been viewed only as a hindrance – with the common strengths of resourcefulness, and insightful and creative thinking common to dyspraxic individuals often ignored. As with other forms of neurodivergence, dyspraxia occurs across the spread of intellectual ability, gender, and ethnicity.

‘Dyspraxic people tend to be good at bold “big picture” thinking, pattern-spotting and inferential reasoning.’

What proportion of people are dyspraxic?

At least 1 in 17 people are thought to be dyspraxic. Famous dyspraxic people include Daniel Radcliffe, Florence Welch, and Cara Delevingne.

Common strengths at work

Dyspraxic people tend to be good at bold ‘big picture’ thinking, pattern-spotting and inferential reasoning. They are often resourceful and determined problem-solvers. Given these skills, and frequent co-occurrence with dyslexia, it’s likely that there are similar (though less well studied) correlations with entrepreneurship. In the words of dyspraxic and dyslexic entrepreneur, Oliver Bruce, ‘For me, having dyslexia and dyspraxia has not impacted my life dramatically. ... I’ve always just got on with things and ignored it. It’s helped me with running a business, because you have to think about things in a different way. ... There are a lot of business owners that have dyslexia and I think it is important for people to know what you can achieve with a disability.’³⁰

Stephanie Guidera, a classical singer who is dyspraxic, provided succinct insight into both her experience of being dyspraxic and its strengths in a BBC interview. She describes it as like being ‘left-handed in a right-handed world. It’s unique to each person and for me it makes me more creative, original and unique.’³¹

Potential challenges at work

Because of motor co-ordination challenges, dyspraxic people may experience difficulty in the workplace related to movement – this could include clumsiness, and difficulties operating machinery (such as a printer) or using a keyboard and mouse (a roller ball mouse is often preferred).



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Like dyslexic people, dyspraxic individuals may find time management and personal organisation challenging, and benefit from similar coping strategy training and tech, along with helpful and empathetic management. There are also parallels with autistic people, as dyspraxia is linked with significant sensory sensitivity; this could cause discomfort in a work environment featuring significant noise or fluorescent white lights, or awkwardness in social interactions with co-workers due to eye contact feeling overwhelming.

As with people in other neurominorities, dyspraxic individuals may also have low self-esteem and experience stress and frustration – this could be from experiencing challenges in practical tasks, potentially exacerbated by a lack of empathy from colleagues and co-workers within organisations that are yet to embrace neurodiversity at work.

Simple adjustments – big impact

Although dyspraxic people are unlikely to thrive in roles that involve intense motor co-ordination skills, such roles represent only a small percentage of jobs in the modern workforce. As a result, with their unique and valuable thinking style, dyspraxic people can be effective and successful across a huge range of roles – and such success can typically be facilitated by HR through simple, cheap accommodations or adjustments. These can include providing information – such as application forms, onboarding materials, or manager instructions – in multiple formats, reassigning small elements of a job role, and providing desk trays to assist with personal organisation.

ADHD as it relates to the workplace

Understanding ADHD

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is classified as a brain-based disorder characterised by a persistent pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity and impulsivity. Contrary to popular perception, the brains of ADHDers are actually under-stimulated, helping to explain these characteristics. ADHD usually occurs over a person's lifetime – contrary to stereotypes, it is not limited to children, or to males: current diagnosis rates show around a 3:1 male-to-female ratio.

There are different subtypes of ADHD (inattentive, hyperactive, and combined type), and every individual ADHDer is unique and experiences the world in their own way.

As with other aspects of human neurodiversity, such as autism, ADHD has long been framed largely in negative terms. ADHDers may be – to a greater or lesser extent, and with significant individual variability – forgetful, absent-minded, easily distracted and easily bored. Yet by focusing only on negatives as compared with neurotypicals, society – and, by extension, businesses – has been overlooking the 'flip side' strengths of this alternative thinking style.

What proportion of people are ADHDers?

Worldwide prevalence of ADHD is estimated at around 3.4% in adults.³² It is around three times more common in men than women. Famous ADHDers appear at the top of multiple professions, and include singers Justin Timberlake and Adam Levine, actor Ryan Gosling, chef Jamie Oliver (who, from a young age, channelled his energy and focus into cooking) and arguably the world's greatest ever basketball player, legend Michael Jordan. A number of eminent historical figures – such as Walt Disney – may also have been ADHDers.



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Common strengths at work

ADHDers tend to be comfortable taking calculated risks, being at ease with uncertainty and pushing boundaries – no surprise, then, the particular prevalence amongst entrepreneurs. Thom Hartman, an influential radio host and ADHDer, has termed ADHDers *‘hunters in a farmers’ world’*.³³ Dale Archer, author of *The ADHD Advantage*, picks up this thread in what can be seen as a rallying cry to an HR profession in a constant search for talent: *‘we need to recognise, embrace and skilfully use the best of this ADHD trait, not manage or stifle or “normalise” the very qualities that could define our next generation’s leaders.’*

Insightfulness, creative thinking and problem-solving are strengths often associated with ADHDers in the workplace. An ability to multitask and respond to changing environments and work demands is also increasingly relevant and valuable in the current world and workplace of ‘information overload’. Given their ongoing search for mental stimulation, ADHDers can also be remarkably composed in pressure situations that neurotypicals would likely find overwhelming. In addition, and very much contrary to stereotypes (and, indeed, the name ‘ADHD’), the ability to hyperfocus when in a state of ‘flow’ on a stimulating task is an oft-forgotten attribute of many ADHDers.

‘Both role-fit and helpful adjustments will vary from individual to individual.’

Potential challenges at work

ADHDers in the workplace can find themselves feeling restless, distracted and easily bored in a role or with work tasks that are not sufficiently stimulating. Many ADHDers also cannot screen out sensory input, meaning they can be more easily distracted in the workplace than neurotypicals. They may also experience further challenges relating to attention, such as maintaining focus during long meetings, or switching focus once in a state of ‘flow’ on a task. Remember that the stereotype that ADHDers ‘cannot focus’ is utterly false – they can focus and generate outstanding output when sufficiently stimulated by work tasks. Given the nature of the ADHDer ‘hummingbird mind’, organisation and time management can also be challenging – as can organising thoughts when in conversation.

ADHDers at work: finding their fit

ADHDers can evidently bring valuable skills and attributes to the workplace – and well-informed HR managers can help to include and leverage this talent pool. Success is likely to come from a combination of finding ‘fit’ – a role whose core ingredients and work tasks sync with common ADHDer characteristics – and the employer providing (generally inexpensive) support such as coaching and person-centric adjustments. HR should also be aware that common challenges in the workplace experienced by ADHDers can all be mitigated by a range of support types: from coaching in communication skills, to mentoring, to assistance with self-organisation strategies such as goals, priorities, and to-do lists. Allowing breaks for a change of scene and physical activity is another ‘adjustment’ that is free to make, and that could boost both comfort and productivity for all employees, not just for ADHDers.

Both role-fit and helpful adjustments will vary from individual to individual. However, there are typical elements here: ADHDers, for example, are unlikely to suit very routine, predictable jobs as these may not provide sufficient stimulation. Put simply, ADHDers need a job where they won’t get bored. The positive dimension of this is that they can



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thrive in high pressure jobs, such as trading, or management. Given the value ADHDers can bring to their work, it's important that HR and managers accept ADHDer employees for who they are, and that both sides work together to find the best path. This can often be facilitated by self-awareness on the part of the ADHDer.

Less common aspects of neurodivergence

Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia has traditionally been defined as a neurological condition that causes difficulties with arithmetic calculations such as sizing, ordering, and reading and writing numbers. This can be problematic in the workplace, as many jobs require at least basic mathematical ability. Dyscalculia is often experienced alongside dyslexia and/or dyspraxia. The prevalence of dyscalculia is estimated at around 5%.³⁴

In the case of an employee with similar challenges, be empathetic, and don't immediately assume they have either an overall low intellectual ability, or a lack of interest and passion for numbers-related subject areas. There are simple coping strategies that can remedy many challenges, for example providing a process map for doing computation so that the person does not have to remember the sequence of steps. Where it is necessary to compare numbers, having two screens can be really beneficial.

Dysgraphia

Individuals with dysgraphia – of which the prevalence in the overall population is still being explored – can have challenges with aspects of writing such as writing very slowly, having confused writing, and experiencing difficulties copying information accurately. Simple accommodations can be helpful here, such as minimising writing tasks, use of assistive software or a Dictaphone.

As with dyscalculia, if you're a colleague or manager to someone with dysgraphia, be empathetic and don't assume that it means their overall abilities or work quality are likely to be low. There is no correlation between intelligence and the prevalence of ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia or any other related aspect of neurodivergence.

Tic disorders

Tics can be physical, such as shrugging the shoulders and more substantial body motions, or can be verbal, such as laughing, talking or coughing. The well-known Tourette's syndrome, characterised by at least one vocal tic, only represents a small percentage of individuals with tic disorders. The severity of tic conditions varies significantly, meaning mild cases may go undetected. Tic disorders can be managed in a number of ways, from medication to behavioural therapy and counselling, and through exercise and relaxation. Between 0.3% and 1% of people are thought to have a tic condition.³⁵

Neurodiversity and mental health

Mental health has risen firmly up the organisational agenda over the past ten years, and rightly continues to be a major focus for many employers. Mental health refers to a person's mental and emotional well-being; mental ill health can affect anyone, neurotypical or neurodivergent.

The World Health Organization defines mental health as: *'a state of well-being in which every individual realizes his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.'*³⁶



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Mind (2016)³⁷ states that mental health problems *‘affect the way you think, feel and behave. They affect around one in four people in Britain, and range from common mental health problems, such as depression and anxiety, to more rare problems such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder. A mental health problem can feel just as bad, or worse, as any other physical illness – only you cannot see it.’*

Mental health and neurodiversity are not the same; however, the terms are often mixed up and the difference between them misunderstood. In short, if someone is neurodivergent this doesn’t mean they have a mental health condition. However, the National Autistic Society explains that *‘mental illness can be more common for people on the autism spectrum than in the general population’*.³⁸ A study by Weiss et al (2018) concludes, *‘Our findings echo other studies that have consistently shown that people with ASD... [autism spectrum disorder] have more medical and mental health issues compared to the general population’*. The extra pressures for autistic people to navigate a world shaped for neurotypicals seem likely to contribute to a greater likelihood of their mental health being affected. At work, it’s not hard to imagine how unempathetic co-workers could lead neurodivergent people to feel isolated or even ridiculed or bullied – or how unempathetic managers could contribute to stress and anxiety regarding work performance and job security.

‘Mental health and neurodiversity are not the same; however, the terms are often mixed up and the difference between them misunderstood.’

The associations between neurodiversity and mental health are still being explored. They both are often ‘hidden’ or ‘invisible’ and we need a much better understanding of the difference between neurodiversity and mental health. We also need a deeper understanding of how to provide appropriate support in the workplace to neurodivergent individuals with a mental health problem. For example, the National Autistic Society points out that *‘the mental health of autistic people is often overlooked’*. Some firms with leading neurodiversity at work programmes are sponsoring major research projects in this field – conscious that while neurodiversity and mental health are not the same, given the prevalence rates of mental health problems among the neurodivergent population, the latter must be a consideration when ensuring greater inclusion of neurodiverse talent.

The CIPD has produced a factsheet³⁹ on mental health in the workplace which includes a section on supporting employees’ mental health at work with links to other resources, and specialist charity websites.

6 Making your people management approach neurodiversity smart

Recruitment and selection

Successful talent management starts with the hiring process – the majority of which have typically been designed only with neurotypicals in mind. Such processes can have the effect of *unintentionally excluding* neurodiverse talent. This can result from the style of job descriptions discouraging applications, unempathetic interviewers unnecessarily punishing a lack of eye contact or unconventional body language at interview, or from neurodivergent applicants being confused or rushed by additional assessments or tests.



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Simple adjustments to what can be seen as common ‘friction points’ can – as with other aspects of neurodiversity inclusion – have broader benefits beyond the neurodivergent demographic.

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Employer brand

Ensure neurodiversity is highlighted as part of your organisation’s employer brand, for example within the diversity and recruitment areas of the organisation’s website. You may also want to list the employee resource groups you have relating to disability or neurodiversity. You could also include micro case studies of how individual neurodivergent employees have been supported and successful within your organisation – such stories are likely to encourage other talented applicants to apply.

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Role descriptions

Strategically assessing your current hiring processes can be a valuable exercise, addressing questions such as what the right mix is between recruiting for generalist skills, or people with outstanding abilities in specific areas.

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Often, hiring managers will fall into the trap of re-using past job descriptions that may include skills requirements that are not necessary for the role in question. There is also often a tendency – however conscious or strategic – to look to hire generalists, who appear to tick ‘all’ possible boxes relating to a particular work role. Yet such an approach is likely to exclude individuals with narrower and deeper strengths. The frequent requirement for ‘excellent communication skills’ could, for example, discourage applications from individuals who are outstanding in information and data processing, essential skills for the role, but less confident and competent socially.

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‘Hiring processes ... designed only with neurotypicals in mind ... can have the effect of unintentionally excluding neurodiverse talent.’

Employers that stick too rigidly to uniform competency-based job descriptions risk excluding neurodivergent applicants who may excel in certain areas but significantly underperform in others. *‘The problem is not so much that [neurodivergent people] have disabilities but there are too many disabling organisations,’* commented an autistic employee who took part in the research for this guide.

Ensuring role descriptions are as clear and concise as possible, avoiding jargon, is also likely to benefit all applicants. Job descriptions should be very clearly demarcated into ‘must-have’ and ‘nice-to-have’ skills and experience. Do not include skills such as ‘excellent communication skills’ as ‘must-haves’ if they are ‘nice-to-haves’ as this could dissuade talented applicants (particularly autistic people, likely to be very literal thinkers, and dyslexic people who may fear the requirements for written communication skills) from applying. Make it easy for people to see what the core skills for the role are, otherwise an applicant may read the role description as if all the requirements are essential and not apply, despite excelling at the core skills.

Lastly, including a diversity and inclusion statement in the job description – stating you are happy to discuss reasonable adjustments – signals that your organisation consciously welcomes candidates with different identities and thinking styles.



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Candidate filtering and selection

At the top of the recruitment funnel, consider candidate filtering tools that focus on removing unconscious bias, enabling blind recruitment on a number of levels. It's particularly important to avoid penalising neurodivergent applicants for patchy educational or work history – they may never have previously had a supportive working environment. Overly tough critique of a spelling error may mean you unintentionally screen out talented people with dyslexia.

Note that where relevant, reviewing previous work (for example, an app they've developed) can provide a clear indication of an applicant's (demonstrated) capabilities, and is less likely to be affected by unconscious bias.

Disclosure

Candidates should be offered opportunities throughout the hiring process to disclose as neurodivergent (or disclose any other private information they see fit). Disclosure at this stage can have the benefit of facilitating a discussion on potential accommodations, such as bringing a supporter to an interview, interviewing via telephone or video chat, or additional time to take work assessments. However, as Acas states, there is no general duty for people to disclose.

The neurodiversity-smart recruitment approach at Auticon

Auticon is an award-winning IT and compliance consulting business where all consultants are on the autism spectrum. Auticon creates autism-friendly work environments to deliver outstanding quality to clients. Auticon consultants have a sharp sense of logic, attention to detail, persistent concentration, the ability to think analytically and infer exceptionally farsighted conclusions. These strengths make them highly innovative problem-solvers and are invaluable in the field of IT quality assurance.

Ray Coyle, UK Chief Executive, explains how they designed their recruitment approach to attract the best people for the job. *'Most organisations focus a lot on CVs and interviews. This places a big focus on what people have been doing in the past and their social skills or ability to sell their skills in an interview setting. In many cases, however, social skills may not even be crucial for the role – for example, you may risk turning down a brilliant data analyst for the lack of a skill that isn't even relevant to the role.'*

'At Auticon we don't interview and don't focus on CVs. We're interested in what people can do and we have a whole range of ways to look at candidates' technical and cognitive skills. We want to find out how our candidates think and have developed a range of assessments to understand our candidates' cognitive profiles.'

'We make sure that we understand our consultants' intelligence profile and then match it to our clients' needs – do they need someone who can work through things fast with a high level of accuracy, someone with an analytic mind or a problem-solver? When the match between skills and role profile is right, performance can be staggeringly good.'

We believe that's a much better way of hiring than generic job descriptions and excluding people on criteria that often aren't important to the job. Hiring managers sometimes tend to invite people for an interview on the basis of "I'll know what I want when I see it," without fully articulating what it is they are looking for. In those situations interviews can easily turn into mere tests of social interaction.'



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If someone chooses to disclose, the way the interviewer responds is critical. Interviewers should be made aware of the possibility of disclosure from any applicant and – crucially – be aware of key ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’ here. For example, Acas explains, *‘if they do volunteer this information, interviewers must not respond by asking further questions about it. They should take particular care not to be influenced by the information in their selection decisions. Candidates should discuss their condition, however, when it might pose a risk at work to themselves or others.’*

‘Employers should ask candidates whether they need any “reasonable adjustments”, sometimes also called “access requirements”, for any part of the recruitment process. This is not the same as asking a candidate whether he or she is disabled.’ Asking all interviewees if they require reasonable adjustments for the interview process may result in a positive discussion of needs.

Asking a candidate directly if they have a disability is likely to be against the law. Acas provides further useful guidance for employers on this topic⁴⁰ and states, *‘Most employers know that they shouldn’t ask applicants at interview if they have a disability or other health-related questions, except in a few very limited circumstances. This is to ensure that applicants are offered work on their own merits and are not discriminated against because of disability.’*

Interviews

A conventional interview is often principally a test of recall and ‘social competence’. This form of assessment can put some neurodivergent people at a disadvantage, making it harder for them to demonstrate the skills and aptitudes required for the job role in question. For example, some people may be overly honest about weaknesses, struggle with eye contact or lack confidence because of previous bad experiences.

‘There is a substantial risk with interviews that ill-informed, unempathetic interviewers could make negative judgements on an applicant’s suitability for a role.’

There is a substantial risk with interviews that ill-informed, unempathetic interviewers could make negative judgements on an applicant’s suitability for a role – unless they have received training in neurodiversity awareness and inclusion, and are primed instead to take a ‘moment of pause’ to consider how to enable an applicant to perform at their best in this form of assessment.

For example, being given time to absorb interview questions and having questions asked in the same sequence can be beneficial for dyslexic individuals and for other neurodivergent people. In fact, this could be beneficial universal practice, meaning an interview is no longer a test of recall speed.

Here are some tips if you are using conventional interviews, many of which reflect ‘universal accommodations’ and are, in essence, general good people management practice:

- Recognise that interviews are generally more a test of social competence than ability to perform specific job tasks of a particular role.



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- Provide the candidate in advance with clear communication about how to get to the interview venue (preferably with visual clues) and what to expect in the interview – including who they will meet, the length and format of the interview – and choose a suitable, quiet space free from distractions.
- Be aware of the bias of ‘first impressions’ and avoid penalising unconventional body language or an apparent lack of social interaction skills.
- Ask direct, specific questions rather than questions based on conjecture.
- Avoid rapid fire questions from multiple interviewers as this can cause stress and anxiety, be off-putting and hard to follow.
- Be prepared to facilitate in the interview if necessary – for example, if an interviewee’s answers are informative, but too long, it’s fine to gently cut them off and say ‘thank you, you have told us enough about that now – I’d like to ask you a different question now’.

Alternative assessments

Consider alternative assessment methods beyond interviews, for example work trials, practical assessments (either in person or remote) and mini apprenticeships. These all have the benefit of focusing on the applicant’s ability to perform the job role. Some organisations with autism hiring programmes, such as DXC Technology and SAP, supplemented or even replaced ‘conventional’ interviews with practical work assessments.

‘Work samples may be preferable to psychometric tests, which may not give a true picture of someone who is neurodivergent, even with the reasonable adjustment of extra time.’

Ensure any existing assessments used are neurodiversity friendly. Their stated purpose should be clear, as should instructions and questions – and it’s worth communicating that such tests likely form just one part of a broader candidate assessment process. Where possible, make such tests available in multiple formats – and also consider offering additional time to take them, as a reasonable accommodation. In addition, having verbal or recorded instructions for assessment tasks is a very cheap accommodation.

Work samples may be preferable to psychometric tests, which may not give a true picture of someone who is neurodivergent, even with the reasonable adjustment of extra time.

Induction and onboarding

Induction

Onboarding processes can be problematic for neurodivergent new hires for a number of reasons. Often, they emphasise social interaction and group ‘icebreaker’ activities – these may suit neurotypicals, but can be anxiety-inducing and challenging for people with social communication challenges. Training courses may ask for a scribe or feedback which can be embarrassing for a dyslexic person. In some cases, you may want to provide a more tailored, lower-stress, one-to-one employee experience.

Information communication during the onboarding process can be substantial – and potentially overwhelming – yet at the same time fail to inform new hires of important aspects of the workplace. As far as possible, information should be comprehensive, provided in advance, and offered in a variety of formats. It’s also important to highlight what may appear ‘obvious’ aspects of the organisation’s culture and conventions, from



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typical work hours and patterns, conventional times for breaks, typical communication channels, and so on. As with many of the suggestions in this section, a well-thought-through onboarding process will benefit all new starters.

As part of the onboarding process, you may want to provide workspace preference questionnaires to all new hires, as many employees may have certain preferences for a whole host of reasons. Periodic ‘comfort at work’ reviews can then help ensure workplace adjustments are not a one-off activity. These could be conducted within manager–employee one-to-ones, or within broader employee satisfaction surveys.

The individualised approach at Auticon

‘Many employers put cognitive diversity in the “too difficult” pile. On the face of it, tailored inductions and ongoing support may seem less efficient, as people think efficiency means applying a uniform process to everyone. In reality it is actually more efficient to put effort into something that genuinely works for everyone, taking into account individual strengths. Rather than trying to fit square pegs into round holes, companies should create environments in which pegs of all different shapes and sizes can thrive.’

‘Traditional workplaces are built to suit “neurotypical” people. However, employees who fall slightly outside the range of what is considered typical often have valuable skills that employers need, such as lateral thinking or innovative problem-solving. It’s necessary to make adjustments for people on an individual basis to ensure they can perform their best in their role. The adjustments needed are often very small and minor, such as allowing someone to work from home once in a while, or slightly amending the style of communication. However, you can only understand the adjustments people need if you take the time to understand the individual. It’s very easy to implement once you know what to do, and the business value of this will be tremendous – but you need to put the initial effort into it.’

‘You need to understand how your employees can best learn and absorb information. The idea of one uniform process that’s ideal for everyone is outdated, considering the immense spectrum of human talent and diversity.’

Ray Coyle, UK CEO of Auticon

Reasonable adjustments

Adjustments – also known as accommodations – are changes to the work environment that allow people with a disability to work safely and productively. The Equality Act 2010 stipulates that employers have a duty to make ‘reasonable adjustments’ to support people with disabilities in the workplace – job applicants, as well as employees. *‘Employers must make adjustments if all the following things apply:*

- *you’re disadvantaged by something because of your disability*
- *it’s reasonable to make the changes in order to avoid the disadvantage, and*
- *the employer knows, or should reasonably be expected to know, about your disability and the disadvantage suffered because of it.’*⁴¹



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Therefore hiring processes and work environments in which individuals feel comfortable disclosing are valuable. However, good practice would be to consider reasonable adjustments from any applicant or employee, as people may not know they have a disability; but even small changes to the work or working arrangements can make a big difference to someone's working life.

Reasonable adjustments can refer to more or less any aspect of an individual's role or working arrangements – examples could include:

- giving a job applicant extra time in an assessment test
- allowing an applicant – for example, a non-verbal autistic person – to bring a supporter to their interview; this supporter can assist with communication, as well as being a familiar source of comfort
- providing interview questions in advance, to give people the opportunity to read and absorb them in a stress-free way
- adjustments to an individual's workspace, such as allowing use of a private office, or a desk by a window
- provision of assistive tech, such as handheld organisers to assist with time management and prioritisation
- role adjustments, where non-core aspects of an employee's work tasks are reassigned.

Access to Work

Access to Work is a government programme to support people with disabilities in employment. If the help an individual needs at work isn't covered by the employer making reasonable adjustments, it may be possible to get help from Access to Work, such as for special equipment, adaptations, a support worker or job coach.

www.gov.uk/access-to-work

Disability Confident

The Disability Confident scheme is a government-led initiative designed to support employers to make their workplaces more open, accessible, diverse and inclusive. It's designed to help employers recruit and retain disabled people and people with health conditions for their skills and talent.

The scheme has three levels, which guide you through the journey to become a Disability Confident Leader. There is also practical guidance to support employers to become more confident when attracting, recruiting and retaining disabled people.

<https://disabilityconfident.campaign.gov.uk/>

Managing a neurodiverse team

Neurodiversity smart management

Neurodiversity smart management has two key dimensions. First, given the fact that employees may not disclose (or even realise) that they are neurodivergent, managers can and should take proactive steps to improve their people management practices across the board, from ensuring clarity of communication to taking responsibility for



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understanding each employee's strengths and challenges, and developing with that employee a structured path for career progression. In this sense, as elsewhere, managing with neurodivergent people in mind is likely to benefit the whole team – in this case, all of a particular manager's direct reports. In the words of Silvio Bessa, senior director of digital business services at SAP, when interviewed by Robert D. Austin and Gary P. Pisano for the *Harvard Business Review* – managing neurodivergent people *'forces you to get to know the person better, so you know how to manage them ... it's made me a better manager, without a doubt.'*

The second dimension – complementing the first – is a willingness to be highly person-centric in management style and manager assistance offered. An increased understanding of neurodiversity leads to something of a perspective shift in management. As all employees fit somewhere on the human spectrum of neurodiversity, it follows that each will have their own strengths and challenges, their own preferences for communication patterns and channels, social preferences, workspace preferences, and so on. Thus, neurodiversity smart management combines a proactive approach to ensure clarity and inclusion across the board, with highly tailored attention to individual employee needs. Ultimately, a manager needs to create an environment where employees can perform at their best.

A line manager perspective

'I've found managing someone who is neurodivergent an enlightening experience as it makes you think about how you support everyone you line manage. For example, if you think about how you communicate with colleagues, you will do so often from your own perspective; offering or imparting information in a way that we would like to receive that information or how we assume someone would want that information.'

'Since managing and working with someone who is neurodivergent, I have become more acutely aware of different communication methods (verbal, written, pictures and images, face-to-face, structured, etc) and make sure I understand preferences in communication styles. I've since been able to employ this new way of thinking to everyone that I support.'

'I have also reconsidered the idea of support as a line manager. People who have disclosed as neurodivergent or with a disability are often labelled as needing more support or being more difficult to manage. The reality in fact is that they may just need a different kind of support. You may need to think about reasonable adjustments and how you can implement them; you might need to help decipher social cues of office behaviour. Just because it's different, doesn't make it harder.'

'Getting line management right is a constant learning process, but what you need to do is focus on people's skills, talents and abilities. Work hard to make sure you bring in people who are different from you and the team you already have. Focus on the interesting or unusual interview answers, not the textbook ones, and score differently to identify original thinking. The most successful teams will have diverse perspectives and backgrounds and a good manager will know how to conduct these individual players to create an orchestra.'

Sean Gilroy, Head of Cognitive Design, BBC Design and Engineering



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The following are some examples of areas where neurodiversity smart management can be both practised proactively and tailored to individual needs:

- **Clarifying organisational conventions:** new hires won't necessarily immediately pick up on the 'unwritten rules' and conventions of your particular organisation and workplace – and autistic people, for example, can find the lack of clear, direct information here particularly challenging. Managers can help with the onboarding process by talking their employee through some of these conventions – these could relate to time at work, breaks, dress code, social events and more.
- **Clear task communication:** managers should take time over their task communication process. Neurodivergent people in particular may appreciate instructions in multiple formats. For dyslexic and dyspraxic employees, managers could consider providing mnemonics and mind maps to help people prioritise work and meet deadlines. Even where a manager has a solid task communication process, in the pressure of the workplace, tasks are often communicated in a rush with the process discarded – this is important to avoid, as it can lead to confusion, stress, and anxiety – and lost productivity as a result.

A strengths-based approach to people management

Research conducted for this guide and recent CIPD research on performance management⁴² suggests organisations seeking to become more inclusive and get the best out of an increasingly diverse workforce need to focus much more on people's strengths and what they do well rather than what they can't do or aren't very good at.

Employers that rely too much on rigid competency frameworks to underpin their performance management and development activities risk excluding or disadvantaging neurodivergent individuals and others who may excel on some competency measures but score very poorly on others.

The CIPD's research on performance management highlights the benefits of a strengths-based approach to performance management. The report suggests that the theory of appreciative enquiry can provide a more effective basis for improvement than a deficit model with negative feedback. This approach is founded on a belief that it is more effective to consider carefully what people do well and try to find ways of using these strengths in other aspects of their work than to get them to invest time in areas where they have less inherent aptitude.

Employers should focus much more on the core skills and competencies needed to do the particular job well rather than requiring a 'vanilla' approach where individuals have to demonstrate a broad minimum level of competence across an agreed framework. In some cases HR practitioners and line managers will need to adapt job descriptions to play to the strengths of neurodiverse individuals and other employees to utilise their skills effectively.

However, as the CIPD report notes, this *'approach may represent quite a departure for most people and organisations. Even when we are focused on learning, which may feel like a positive thing, it is easy to assume that our main objective should be to develop skills we don't currently have or have in short supply. Fully moving to a strengths-based approach thus needs concerted effort both from managers and their reports and careful alignment with HR.'*



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- **Flexibility:** a flexible, empathetic attitude can have benefits across a number of areas. One such area is working time – as individual employees are likely to have their own preferences relating to working patterns and frequency of social interaction. Again, flexible working can benefit everyone for all different reasons.
Another example is role flexibility. Neurodivergent people may have exceptional abilities in certain areas, leading to outstanding performance on core tasks. They may, however, struggle with elements of their role: for example, a dyslexic employee finding it difficult to proofread at speed, or a dyspraxic employee finding it hard to construct/read/manage a budget spreadsheet. In these cases, managers should be flexible – and consider role adjustments that help play to employees’ strengths across the team. Similarly, where a talented employee is finding more substantial elements of their role uncomfortable – perhaps an ADHDer finds their role too static and slow paced – efforts should be made to accommodate the employee in an adjusted or new position that better suits these preferences. In turn, they could take on aspects of someone else’s role that they excel at but the other person doesn’t enjoy.
- **Structured, positive feedback:** a regular pattern of feedback – and opportunities for the employee to provide feedback to the manager, too – gives the manager an opportunity to review progress and assist where necessary, and to *learn how they can better manage* each employee. Praise – on an ongoing basis – is also important. This has been highlighted as beneficial for all employees, and will be particularly so for neurodivergent individuals, who may have low self-esteem and anxiety as a result of previous negative experiences.
- **Introducing change sensitively:** autistic people in particular often enjoy the comfort (and manageable sensory input) of a familiar routine – thus change, big or small – can be substantially disruptive and stressful. Taking time to communicate notice of change – and the reasons behind it – in advance, and have employees participate in this process, is another example of an accommodation with broader benefits: consulted employees are more likely to ‘buy in’ to change.⁴³
- **Support and pastoral care:** managers play an important role in monitoring employee engagement and comfort at work. Along with HR, they should be aware of common reasonable adjustments that are possible to enhance the employee experience for different neurominorities in the organisation.

Case study: Rising Tide

Rising Tide in Florida is a car wash brand with a difference. Not only does the firm primarily hire autistic people – now close to 80, in two locations – they have also created ‘RisingTideU’, an online platform with resources and training to support other entrepreneurs in building businesses that follow Rising Tide’s approach to hiring. *‘We’ve experienced day in and day out for the last four years that our employees with autism are simply the best employees,’* co-founder Thomas D’Eri told the *Florida Sun Sentinel*. Rising Tide’s message for other companies: that autistic people can be highly successful, if appropriately included and supported. *‘The talents individuals with autism have hold real value for a variety of businesses when the organizational systems are put in place to help them thrive,’* says Thomas D’Eri. Rising Tide recently received the 2017 Daniel Jordan Fiddle Foundation Leader in Autism Award.



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Progression

There is a risk that highly talented neurodivergent employees miss out on opportunities for career progression. This could be for a number of reasons, ranging from challenges with self-confidence and self-advocacy on the part of the employee, to senior staff wrongly believing neurodivergent employees will not make effective managers, or established views of what a leader looks like.

For some neurodivergent individuals, the practical demands of conventional management – from unpredictable social interactions, to the need to organise not just oneself but others – may not fit with their own skills and strengths. However, progression to a management role must not be discounted – Microsoft, for example, has already seen individuals on their autism hiring programme be promoted. Here as elsewhere, stereotypes must be avoided, as well as jumping to assumptions about someone's career aspirations. All employees should feel able to have an open conversation with their line manager about their ambition and the opportunities available.

Case study: Supported internships at Airwave

Airwave is the largest private operator of a public safety network in the world, delivering mission-critical voice and data communications to more than 300 emergency and public service agencies in Great Britain.

In 2016 they launched a supported internships programme in partnership with a local college for young people with disabilities and additional needs. Two members of staff initiated the partnership, spending time at the college and speaking to other organisations who had run a similar programme to gain an understanding of how Airwave could best accommodate interns in their business. They saw the benefits for the individuals taking part as well as the business benefits and the clear alignment with Airwave's value of inclusivity.

Three interns joined the organisation's Rugby office who matched the requirements for the identified job roles and had aspiration within those areas of the business. Before the interns joined, the college provided training for their future teams and mentors on how to support them most effectively. A job coach, employed by the college, had an office on site to support the students once in their roles and they spent part of each day with the job coach to cover the curriculum required for their studies.

The interns exceeded initial performance expectations, challenging any initial ideas of capabilities, and managers noticed a step-change in the overall positivity and motivation of the teams they worked in as a result of recruiting from a broader talent pool. Team members developed their coaching and communication skills, sharing information more openly and clearly. In addition, supporting the students presented personal development opportunities to aspiring supervisors and managers. However, overall, embracing the programme has helped to embed the organisation's value of inclusivity into how business is done at Airwave.

One student was offered a job at Airwave and plans are under way to run the supported internships again. The two employees who initiated the programme are continuing to build relationships with the college and with other businesses running the programme.



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It's worth remembering that some people with outstanding technical skills and deep domain interest may not necessarily want to move into management – they may instead want to maximise the opportunities for recognition and progression in their chosen field. Organisations should consider designing jobs and alternative career paths for such technical specialists to ensure they feel valued and can benefit from progression if the management route is not the right one for them, for whatever reason.

When people do move roles, providing a workplace needs assessment for the new job can enable coping strategies and adjustments to be deployed, as well as the person being able to discuss how they can best utilise their strengths in the new role. Once again, this practice has the potential to benefit everyone, enabling all employees to perform at their best.

7 Building an inclusive, neurodiverse workplace

The following is not an exhaustive or prescriptive list – rather, they are prompts for action to be tailored to your specific organisation context.

C-suite advocacy

Senior leadership championing neurodiversity – and making it clear the organisation takes neurodiversity seriously – sends a positive signal both internally and externally. This could include speaking or blogging about neurodiversity in the organisation or sponsoring and being a visible part of their organisation's own neurodiversity-at-work programme.

Some leaders are likely to have their own direct personal connection to neurodiversity – and for that reason, be particularly keen to be an advocate and supporter of their own organisation's initiatives in this area.

Awareness training

Neurodiversity awareness training across the organisation can help develop a general awareness, understanding and appreciation of colleagues. This is vital as, for example, there is a risk that uninformed co-workers may see a neurodiverse colleague who is having difficulty with one aspect of their role as lazy or inept. This can then make employees less willing to disclose, fearing negative repercussions – a 'reactive' decision to disclose under such pressure can be met with scepticism (further discouraging others from disclosing). In extreme cases, there may be bullying or complaints about someone's work or behaviour at work.

Through suitable training, staff can become comfortable about how to talk about neurodiversity. Establishing a basic etiquette will help to put neurodivergent employees at ease, while also allowing management and colleagues to approach issues without fear of 'getting it wrong'. Training can also prepare employees to respond sensitively to a colleague disclosing as neurodivergent, and how to conduct group project work in a manner that is inclusive to neurodivergent team members and optimises productivity.

Training for managers is a staple feature of neurodiversity-at-work programmes globally – this can provide managers with a core understanding of the reality of neurodiversity, strategies for responding to disclosure, giving clear instructions, assisting with potential challenge areas, introducing change sensitively, and so on.



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Autism at Rutherford Appleton Laboratory

The HR team at the Science and Technologies Facilities Council (STFC) became aware of an employee who had received a late diagnosis of autism. The organisation was keen to understand how best it could meet his needs and support him in reaching his full potential and contributing effectively. He worked with STFC HR and an NHS specialist researcher on autism to deliver a number of awareness sessions to help his managers and the HR team understand how to communicate with him to get the best performance from him. These sessions were tailored to different audiences and enabled the individual to articulate his needs in a safe environment.

STFC has benefitted from these sessions in gaining a greater understanding of autism in the workplace and how it can best support its employees. The individual has clearly grown in confidence as he has understood his condition better and been supported in talking about autism and its impact at work.

Creatively raising awareness of neurodiversity at the BBC

'The skills and talents of neurodivergent individuals would greatly benefit the creative and digital industries if organisations can properly address the barriers that exist which currently prevent many neurodivergent people from securing employment. At the BBC we've been looking at how we can improve understanding of neurodiversity, to dispel the myths and stigma still associated with neurodiversity and work towards removing barriers that neurodivergent individuals face in the workplace.'

'We are a creative organisation and we wanted to make the most of this in our material, applying storytelling to help us get our message across and utilising technology and media in a way that makes it innovative and more engaging.'

'We have produced two films from the perspective of someone who is neurodivergent, designed to help share their experiences during a typical day at work. Our first film highlighted a day in the life of a neurodivergent individual in the workplace, utilising a first-person perspective and based around a video game scenario. The second is a 360-degree virtual reality film, available on YouTube, which employs visual effects and motion graphics to help recreate the sensory challenges and experiences of someone who is neurodivergent.'

'Virtual reality is an immersive experience, generating a personal and emotional connection to the subject. We believe this will translate into better understanding of why someone might ask for particular adjustments and, more importantly, how crucial it is to provide them.'

'We have also produced two interactive access films for visitors to the BBC base in Salford which take the viewer on a journey through the environment they will be visiting. The guides are aimed directly at the visitor (rather than a carer or guardian) so they can independently explore the relevant information at a pace they are comfortable with and can anticipate and employ any coping strategies ahead of their visit.'

Sean Gilroy, Head of Cognitive Design, BBC Design and Engineering



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The working environment

Many aspects of the typical working environment can act as barriers that prevent neurodivergent employees – particularly those with acute sensory sensitivity – from performing at their best at work.

Common issues to consider include:

- **Office lighting:** bright office lights can be distracting and can contribute to sensory overload. Neurodivergent employees could be given a workspace away from such lighting, and with more natural light.
- **Noise levels:** noisy open plan environments can also be highly distracting. HR can assign neurodivergent employees a desk in a quieter area or even a private office, and allow the use of headphones or earplugs.
- **Equipment:** computer screens can be too bright and desks may lack items to aid personal organisation, such as trays and filing drawers. Some companies are making common equipment such as tablet computers with self-organisation apps and desk filing trays available on demand.

Equipment such as photocopiers should have visible instructions nearby, as this is likely to be helpful to individuals with dyspraxia – and, as so often, for all employees.

Accommodations are often simple, cheap or even free, and can make a huge difference to someone's quality of working life and ability to reach their potential. As with all employees, it's important not to assume that everyone will have the same preferences regarding workspaces, or indeed, where they work or at what times of day. Thus, overall adjustments to the workplace can be made proactively – driven by data from onboarding workspace preference questionnaires, and comfort-at-work surveys – with further adjustments available and offered to suit specific, individual preferences.

The physical work environment

'Ahead of an office move to a city centre location, we're factoring neurodiversity considerations into the accessible design of the building. We've designed an audit checklist which helps us consider the different sensory aspects of an office space. For example, if we think about hearing, what are the sources of noise, and if we think about touch, what fabrics are being used in the office?'

'We recognise that wholesale changes may not always be possible and that capital funding is tight, so we also integrate the audit checklist into the maintenance schedule. That means when you're upgrading things you can make the necessary changes then. The checklist can also be used to help inform discussions with people who may be struggling with their current work environment to prompt possible solutions.'

Sean Gilroy, Head of Cognitive Design, BBC Design and Engineering

Support and mentoring strategies

As well as being supported by their line manager, employees may find it useful to have support from HR, job coaches and other vocational support assistance, as well as family and external mentors. Some firms such as SAP and Microsoft have developed and deploy a 'support circles' model that combines elements within the organisation such as the manager, relevant HR professional, and mentor or 'buddy' (collectively, the internal 'circle') with external elements such as job coaches, outside mentors, family and friends.



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The British Dyslexia Association has developed specific tools for mentoring and creating internal networks which are informed by dyslexic people.

Mentoring – one-to-one support for short time periods, with sessions regularly spaced – can be provided either by a ‘buddy’ within the employee’s own team or by a volunteer from elsewhere in the organisation. Either can act as an independent sounding board, and offer advice related to the ‘hidden curriculum’ of unsaid conventions and expectations at the firm, as well as work strategies. A mentor could, for example, reassure an anxious employee that they are unlikely to be fired for making a small error with their work – and could offer advice on how to avoid such issues in future, and on how the employee can constructively discuss the topic with their line manager.

External support workers and coaches can also be beneficial, on a person-by-person basis: these are likely to take a more holistic view of the employee’s well-being, including their mental health. Job coaching can also help individual employees address particular skills gaps, such as communicating with clients or giving presentations.

Employee resource groups can also act as a support network for colleagues and generally advocate the reality and benefits of neurodiversity at work to the business as a whole. Naming all of the employee resource groups operational in the organisation in the onboarding process, the job vacancies part of your website and on the organisation’s intranet can all help send a clear message to staff that neurodiversity is welcomed.

Case study: The dyslexia working group at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory

The Rutherford Appleton Laboratory (RAL) is operated by the Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) and has 1,200 staff, the majority of whom are scientists, professionals and engineers. RAL’s pioneering research in areas such as energy, security, healthcare and the environment addresses important challenges facing society.

The Dyslexia Working Group (DWG) was started at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory approximately five years ago by a physicist who was doing ground-breaking work but was finding it difficult to access and process written information via STFC’s intranet. He contacted HR for support. He founded the DWG and its terms of reference were established. The DWG quickly expanded to its current membership of 40. There are representatives at all of STFC’s sites and the DWG has worked together to provide a successful business case for the purchase of assistive technology, which was fundamental in helping to solve the access problems identified by the physicist.

The DWG identified other challenges which particularly affect dyslexics in the workplace and brought them to the attention of the organisation with proposed solutions and recommendations. For example, most DWG members experience difficulty when they are required to write and publish academic papers. Lack of progress in this area can hinder their careers, causing frustration, despite the ability to deliver an exceptional presentation on their pioneering, complex research at conference sessions around the world with ease. Members of the group were able to benefit from additional training and technology to meet this specific need. STFC works

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hard to ensure that the working environment and the way that jobs are structured supports people to use their skills and talent and achieve their potential at work.

Designed by the DWG, the group attracted members via posters across the organisation. A QR code was included so that employees could scan to find out more and people could enquire discreetly. Any enquiries were treated in the strictest confidence and managed via an anonymous email box called 'dyslexia'. The DWG has worked hard to increase awareness across the organisation of what dyslexia is:

- The group provided training for line managers, dyslexics and the HR team on how to manage the condition, writing skills, and mind-mapping. This training was either designed or tailored by the DWG. Some of the training has been delivered externally on demand.
- The group organised 'Rutherford Appleton Laboratories Lectures' relating to dyslexia, delivered by eminent scientists to promote engagement and curiosity in the subject, and to raise awareness and generate open discussion/understanding.

The Dyslexia Working Group has worked across the whole organisation to make workplace adjustments that have been found to make life better for everyone:

- The group produced a comprehensive set of intranet pages (open to all staff) designed to support line managers and dyslexic employees. These pages include a news page with links to video clips, articles and links to TED Talks, details of upcoming events and useful contacts.
- The group worked with the software developers to make the intranet more navigable, like a smartphone. In addition to the long navigation panel on the side of the homepage, push buttons with visual icons were developed.
- The library has added colour-coded aisles to enhance the traditional letter and number system to assist navigation.
- The organisation invested in assisted reading technology, mind-mapping and other hardware and software.

Maximising customer interactions

Given the prevalence of neurodivergence in the overall population, it's highly likely that a substantial number of the customers and clients your organisation serves are neurodivergent in some way. Customer interaction scenarios vary significantly across industries and business-to-business or consumer-facing contexts; 'customer service' means something very different for an airline as compared with a local council or a private bank.

Some approaches, though, are universal – and should be implemented to optimise the customer experience. For example, customer service processes should be reviewed through the lens of neurodiversity inclusion to prevent creating unnecessary stress for customers – for example, through inconsistent communication, or high-sensory-input environments. Documents and information should be provided clearly and in multiple formats.

Similarly, customer marketing materials should be reviewed for clarity and presentation (avoiding jargon, for example) and, as far as possible, provided in multiple formats. This is another example of universal design, to ensure overall customer interaction is as inclusive as possible.



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Neurodiversity awareness training is also likely to benefit face-to-face customer interactions, helping employees understand that, for example, what appears to be unusually negative body language and lack of eye contact is not necessarily because of rudeness or lack of interest. This could simply be an individual's preferred way of processing sensory information or alleviating social anxiety. As and when a customer may choose to disclose their neurodivergence, such training is also likely to help employees respond positively, sensitively, and constructively.

Case study: National Police Autism Association

The National Police Autism Association (NPAA) supports officers with autism and champions the value of neurodiversity across the UK police service. The NPAA set up an online police neurodiversity forum and recruited one or more officers and civilian staff from each of the 48 UK police forces to volunteer as local autism champions (NPAA Co-ordinators). Through the forum, force co-ordinators share ideas to better support officers with autism, and are encouraged to share good practice to enable the police service as a whole to improve its provision for neurodiverse staff.

People have different motivations for taking on the role as a local champion within their force, including being a parent of a child with autism, having autism themselves or having a professional interest in workforce diversity, for example being an HR professional.

One of the most common initiatives that a number of forces have adopted is inviting local charities to run autism awareness sessions for staff. Gaining an awareness and appreciation of neurodiversity has prompted changes to people management approaches. For example, one force has changed the promotion application process so officers no longer need their line manager to sign off their application form. This change removes the potential for a line manager's subjective views about a candidate's suitability to influence their career progression. Removing the need for a supporting signature means that everyone goes through to a central selection process, and experiences a more objective and fair test of their ability and potential.

Other forces have made their promotion interview process more neurodiversity-friendly by giving candidates the interview questions 30 minutes beforehand. This helps to alleviate the problem some candidates may experience of being very knowledgeable and able, but struggling to articulate answers to questions on the spot and being marked down as a result.

One force is developing a managers' guide to autism and another commissioned a local charity to create a ten-minute video for front-line officers about how to engage with members of the public with autism. The charity then made the video available to all 48 police forces through the NPAA.

In terms of what is next, the National Association of Police Dyslexia is due to be launched later in the year, and will share the neurodiversity online forum the NPAA has established. Both groups are represented nationally by the Disabled Police Association, and will ensure that neurodiversity is a key part of the police service's diversity and inclusion agenda.

Information provided by John Nelson, Chair of the NPAA



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Case study: How Direct Line Group's neurodiversity employee advocacy group has made a positive impact

Direct Line Group is a FTSE 100 company and employs approximately 10,000 people across 15 major offices as well as in its accident repair centres. The group is Britain's leading personal motor and home insurer, measured by in-force policies, and owns brands such as Direct Line, Churchill and Green Flag.

The neurodiversity employee advocacy group was established by four colleagues in different areas of the business who had supported, and were inspired by, neurodivergent team members and saw the undeniable benefits their strengths brought to the business. They also saw that the flexibility they had adopted in their people management style to help neurodivergent individuals perform to their best actually benefited all staff. As a first step, they wrote an article for the intranet which focused on what they referred to as the 'super-strengths' of neurodivergent individuals and received a positive response.

The next step was to secure senior sponsorship, presenting their ideas to two of the directors who were supportive. The directors introduced them to the Diversity Network Alliance (DNA), the group that oversees all diversity activity in the business, including gender, LGBT+, BAME, belief, disability and carers, suggesting they establish a new strand of work on neurodiversity.

The advocacy group then presented a paper to the DNA on what neurodiversity is and what it could mean for employees and the business to do work in this area. Anouski Roberts, Marketing Planning Manager and National Strand Lead for Neurodiversity within DNA, summarises that, *'Thinking differently is the secret ingredient to innovation. It's important to have divergent thinking for creativity and convergent thinking for delivery.'*

The group has quickly acquired new members and is currently 23-strong, focusing on its core purpose: to be a safe, supportive and inspiring place for Direct Line Group people who are passionate about creative and divergent thinking – including those who have neurodivergent traits, or who are involved in developing or caring for others who have them.

The group's aims are:

- 1 Support development of an open culture where people feel accepted and can be their authentic selves.
- 2 Raise awareness of strengths and challenges associated with each trait.
- 3 Develop expertise and share knowledge.
- 4 Use unconventional networking.

1 Development of an open culture

The team have found that a more individual approach to people management is good for everyone. Roberts explains they encourage managers to *'think of people first rather than roles, and help people find their success by finding their niche'*. For example, enable people to be technically excellent without needing to take on people management responsibilities if that isn't their strength.

The innovation skills of an autistic employee were identified and he was asked to troubleshoot a failing process, identify the issues and develop a plan to

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engage and train staff on the process. He developed creative ways of doing this, including creating simple-to-use tick lists and writing a comic book. The audit pass rate rose from 66% to 91%, and this process is being rolled out globally. The overall principle of helping people to find their niche in the business is benefiting individuals and the organisation.

The neurodiversity employee advocacy group worked with the HR team to ensure interview practices are as inclusive as possible from a neurodivergence perspective. They developed guidelines for HR and line managers and tested them out with staff members with a variety of conditions. Their suggestions included giving all candidates interview questions in advance, ensuring questions are clear and concise, thinking about the interview room environment, and asking all candidates if they have any special requirements in advance. But overall, Anouski Roberts says, *'the most important accommodation is acceptance. It's about making people feel they are part of the team. Everyone is different so it's about giving people the tools to do what they need to do.'*

The next area of work focuses on the physical work environment, for example being aware of where people are sitting in terms of ambient noise and lighting. Some staff find providing headsets helps to block out ambient noise, and flexibility around the hot-desking policy enables people to have a permanent desk when needed.

2 Raising awareness

The advocacy group held a bake sale to raise awareness of neurodiversity while also raising money for the National Autistic Society (NAS). They used materials from the NAS website and showed video content about neurodiversity. At an all-staff day focused on diversity, Roberts delivered a presentation on neurodiversity and the group have also recorded podcasts of employee stories to support a company-wide festival that will highlight struggles with adversity, called 'The Invisible Fight'.

The group are looking to run more events, collaborating with the Charities and Social Committee and the Diversity Network Alliance, and plan to support national awareness days to further increase awareness of different conditions.

As well as looking at how the Direct Line Group can be neurodiversity-friendly internally, they are also ensuring their knowledge and learning informs how they interact with consumers. If autism is raised in an insurance claim discussion with a customer, an employee with an understanding of autism helps find a suitable solution to the issue.

Developing expertise and sharing knowledge is an ongoing activity. The advocacy group continues to crowd-source their priorities and share success stories.



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Case study: National Grid's model for supported internships for young people with learning disabilities

National Grid is an electricity and gas company based in the UK and north-eastern US. It states its purpose is safely connecting people to the energy they use. The company is at the heart of one of the greatest challenges facing our society – delivering clean energy to support our world long into the future.

One of the principles of National Grid's responsibility and sustainability framework is to support and help the communities where it works and operates, so these communities can thrive and grow their economies.

In September 2013 National Grid launched *EmployAbility – Let's work together*, an employee-led supported internship programme for young people aged 17–25 with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND). It started as a partnership between National Grid and Round Oak Special Educational Needs School in Warwick. Its purpose is to raise aspirations and significantly improve the likelihood of a young person with learning disabilities achieving paid employment by the provision of supported work placements.

People with learning disabilities have only 6% likelihood of achieving paid employment in their lifetime; this is one of the lowest employment rates of all people with disabilities. Despite this, many young adults with SEND want to work. Employment brings higher self-esteem, confidence, financial security and choices, as well as a feeling of contributing and being part of the community.

In the formative years of the programme, National Grid has already demonstrated at least a ten-fold success rate for the interns by raising employment rates from 6% to 60%. National Grid is committed to making a difference; they see themselves as a catalyst for change and believe working together with partners helps deliver more ambitious results. They are currently working with the Careers & Enterprise Company to highlight this scheme to more businesses and schools.

The programme has already expanded outside National Grid, with new schemes inspired by the programme already running at several companies across the country. Severn Trent in Coventry, Sheffield Teaching Hospitals, Amey in Sheffield, Yorkshire Water in Leeds and a number of other companies have all been inspired to launch their own programmes. These have taken the form of supported internships, supported apprenticeships and micro-businesses.

National Grid's model for supported internships is based on a partnership between businesses and local education providers. National Grid partners with numerous schools and colleges, and the students are supported in National Grid offices by job coaches. These job coaches are provided by the school and funded through the Department for Work and Pensions' Access to Work scheme. Internships run for 11 months in three blocks of placements which mirror the school terms. Interns complete BTEC Work Skills and Functional Skills qualifications in the morning before attending their placements in the business.

Since launching *EmployAbility* in 2013, National Grid has gradually expanded the programme across its sites. During the 2017/18 academic year, they welcomed 16 new interns.

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Impact of the programme

There are clear benefits from taking part for all involved. Through the internship programme, the business has become more disability-confident and there is increased awareness of the talents and skills that people with special educational needs such as autism and Asperger's bring to the business. Existing employees have the opportunity to develop leadership and coaching skills by working with each new cohort of interns. The programme has also positively impacted employee engagement, attraction and retention through building stronger team relationships and making connections with the local community. Overall, through the programme National Grid has been able to attract and retain dedicated people by widening its talent pool.

Benefits for the school or college include being able to offer broader opportunities to their pupils post-education and alternative career pathways. The programme raises the career aspirations of students and is a good way of building relationships with local businesses.

John Pettigrew, CEO of National Grid, said: *'At National Grid we are building a workforce that meets the needs of our business, and also helps to create a fairer and more inclusive society where everyone can reach their full potential.'*

'Since the EmployAbility programme began in 2013, it has transformed young people's lives, engaged our workforce and brought real benefits to the company.'

'I would encourage all employers to consider how they can support young people with special education needs and disabilities to realise their full potential.'

You can find out more about the internship model National Grid has developed at www.employabilityletsworktogether.com

8 Useful resources

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- Access to Work: www.gov.uk/access-to-work
- British Dyslexia Association: www.bdadyslexia.org.uk
- Business Disability Forum: www.businessdisabilityforum.org.uk
- Disability Confident: <https://disabilityconfident.campaign.gov.uk/>
- National Autistic Society: www.autism.org.uk
- Hidden Impairment National Group: <http://neurodiversityemployment.org.uk/hing/what-is-hing/>

Optimize: www.uptimize.com

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