



Supporting neurodiversity in the workplace: a manager's guide.

Practical advice, useful tips and
expert insight to help everyone.

For your team's wellbeing.

March 2021

Helping everyone thrive at work.

To help every employee perform at their best, it's important to get to know each person and understand how traditional workplaces might affect neurodivergent individuals. In this guide, we'll explain what neurodiversity is and how you can adapt to support everyone at work.



What is
neurodiversity

Values of
neurodiversity

Supporting
neurodiversity



What is neurodiversity?

The term neurodiversity refers to the way that everyone's brains naturally work differently from one another. Just as you may be born right-handed, or have green eyes, how your brain works and where you sit on the cognitive spectrum will be unique to you.

Most people are neurotypical or 'not neurodivergent', which means they think and behave in a way that society traditionally considers 'normal'. But around one in seven people are neurodivergent, which means they behave, think, process and interpret information in ways that differ to most other people.

Traditional working practises are often designed with a neurotypical society in mind, which can make it difficult for neurodivergent employees to thrive at work.

Some examples of neurodivergent ways of thinking and behaving can include:

- autism
- attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)
- dyslexia
- dyspraxia
- dyscalculia
- dysgraphia
- tic disorders such as Tourette's syndrome

These conditions often exist on a spectrum and can vary in their effects on different people.



What are the values of neurodiversity in the workplace?

We all have things we're naturally good at and things we're not so good at. Neurodivergent employees often bring unique skills and talents to their work.

For example, depending on the individual, they might be particularly good at:

- problem-solving
- creativity
- innovation
- consistency
- thinking outside of the box
- spotting patterns and trends
- processing information quickly
- data analysis
- seeing things from a different perspective
- attention to detail
- taking risks

Heads up - But there are also some aspects of a traditional working environment that neurodivergent employees might find more challenging or feel uncomfortable about.



How can you support neurodiversity in the workplace?

As an employer, you can recognise and nurture the unique skills of neurodivergent employees, whilst also supporting them through any individual challenges they may face at work.

It's important to note that the extent to which someone's neurodivergence affects them can vary. But for some, it may be regarded as a disability under the Equality Act 2010. So, it's your responsibility as an employer to make any reasonable adjustments to support and enable neurodivergent employees at work.

Although each person will be different, here are some examples of challenges neurodivergent employees may face at work, and some simple adjustments you can make to support them.

1 in 6

Only one in six autistic people in the UK have a full-time job.



Source: What is autism? National Autistic society. www.autism.org.uk, accessed 25 November 2020.

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Get to know the individual

Try to learn more about your team member's neurodivergence so that you can best support them. But remember, even though there are some behaviours or characteristics that are common to neurodivergent conditions, it's important not to make any assumptions as these will vary from person-to-person. While one person with ADHD might struggle to concentrate, another might not. Likewise, while one person with autism might be very good with numbers, another might not. Try not to create any stereotypes. Get to know the person and find out how you can best support their unique characteristics, strengths and challenges.

Provide supportive technology and equipment

Assistive technology and equipment may help some neurodivergent employees to carry out their role. For example, some people with dyspraxia might experience difficulties with their motor coordination, which can make using office equipment like a keyboard, mouse or printer difficult. Some people with autism have limited speech, while some individuals with dyslexia might struggle with reading and writing. Some things you can invest in that might help neurodivergent employees to feel more comfortable at work include:

- speech-to-text, text-to-speech or mind-mapping software
- dictation tools
- a digital recorder
- a daily planner
- a screen overlay
- dual-screens

Caroline Harper and Harriet Finlayson, Mental Health Nurses at Bupa advise:

“A personalised plan of action can help support neurodivergent individuals in the workplace. It's important that this is led by the person themselves, but only if they feel comfortable doing so, as they are the expert on their own needs.”

ADHD

It's estimated that more than three in 100 adults have ADHD.



Source: Neurodiversity at work. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. www.cipd.co.uk, published February 2018

1 in 17

At least one in 17 people are thought to be dyspraxic.



Source: Neurodiversity at work. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. www.cipd.co.uk, published February 2018

Communicate clearly

Some neurodivergent employees may communicate in different ways to neurotypical people. For example, people with autism might not find it easy to read facial expressions or interpret your tone of voice and may take what you say literally. They may not understand things like sarcasm or metaphors, or how to filter out less important information. So try to use direct language and say exactly what you mean. Ask specific questions, structure your instructions, avoid using jargon and allow enough time to process what you're saying.

It might also help to make sure you provide communications materials in a range of formats. For example, clearly documenting training materials and instructions in audio and visual formats may work better for someone with dyslexia than traditional written materials.

Assign work tasks appropriately

Try to think about the type of work, tasks and routines that will work best for the individual. For example, some people with ADHD may find static or repetitive work challenging. So, they might work best in a diverse role, where they can take regular breaks and work flexible hours. Or if your employee has dyslexia and has trouble with writing or numbers, you could re-assign tasks like spreadsheets and letter writing to other team members. Consider giving them jobs that play to their strengths instead. As with all team members, make sure to monitor workload to stop anyone feeling overloaded, stressed or under pressure at work.

700,000

In the UK, it's estimated that around 700,000 adults and children are autistic.



Source: Left stranded: The impact of coronavirus on autistic people and their families in the UK. National Autistic Society. www.autism.org, published September 2020

1 in 10

people in the UK are thought to be dyslexic.



Source: Neurodiversity in the workplace. ACAS. www.acas.org.uk, accessed 23 November 2020.

Consider the physical environment

Traditional workspaces are often designed with the needs of a neurotypical society in mind. But bright lighting, lots of noise and interruptions in a busy office may feel overstimulating for some neurodivergent employees. While group work in a loud area may make it harder for some people to focus. If your employee finds this challenging, you could try:

- investing in adjustable lighting or desk lamps
- using partitions and room dividers or providing a larger personal working space
- providing standing desks
- including clear instructions next to office equipment
- allowing individuals to work from home
- using pens, sticky notes, whiteboards, lockers and boxes to help with memory and organisation

It might also help to have specific quiet zones in your workplace that are available for all employees to use when they need. This can help to create a supportive space while preventing neurodivergent individuals from feeling singled out.

Be understanding and empathetic

It's important to be understanding and approachable so that your staff feel they can come and talk to you and ask for help if they need it. But don't put any pressure on them to open up if they don't want to.

Make sure you arrange regular 1:1s in a confidential space so you can check-in and see how they're doing and whether you need to make any adjustments to their working practices. Review these regularly to make sure they're working. But remember to always ask for the individual's approval before making any adjustments. It may also help to arrange coaching and mentoring for any personal development point they'd like help with, such as time-management or organisation.

If your employee needs support at work, try to remain patient and empathetic towards their feelings, as you would with any other employee. Ensure the rest of your team have an awareness and understanding of neurodiversity to avoid any discrimination. You may wish to let the rest of your team know of their teammate's neurodivergence. But remember, it's up to the individual to make this decision. So, it's important to obtain their permission first before disclosing any information, as they may prefer to keep this private.

Always get permission from neurodivergent employees before making adjustments to their working practices, or disclosing their condition to anyone else. Ask the individual if and how they may want to share their neurodiversity with others.

Raise awareness of neurodiversity among your organisation

Raising awareness and encouraging a greater understanding of neurodiversity in your workplace can have benefits for both employees and employers. Creating an inclusive workplace where neurodiversity is celebrated and accepted can help employers to recruit and retain a diverse and talented workforce. It can also help you to understand and support your neurodivergent customers. Talking openly about neurodiversity, and reducing the stigma surrounding it, will help ensure neurodivergent employees are treated fairly. It may also help neurodivergent employees to open up about any challenges they may be facing at work.

If your employee feels comfortable talking about their neurodivergence, they may wish to raise awareness themselves by delivering a coaching session to their colleagues. This might help them to feel supported and understood. But it's vital that the decision to do this is made by the individual themselves. If they don't wish to disclose their condition at work, as a manager, you can continue to raise awareness of neurodiversity whilst maintaining confidentiality. For example, try sharing useful resources and booklets via email or the company intranet.

Nurture good mental wellbeing

Although neurodiversity and mental health are two different things, they can sometimes get mixed up. But mental health problems such as stress and anxiety are common in neurodivergent people. As a manager, try to remain empathetic and understanding of your neurodivergent employees, who are trying their best to navigate a neurotypical world. Make small adjustments to make their working life easier and look out for their mental wellbeing. It might also help to hold 121s more regularly, signpost neurodivergent individuals to your organisation's mental health support services and ensure individuals have enough time to attend any appointments.

Caroline Harper and Harriet Finlayson,
Mental Health Nurses at Bupa explain:

“As a society we have become more and more aware and informed of neurodiversity which has already helped create positive change for individuals. It's important to continue sharing knowledge of neurodiversity so we can further support individuals and create greater outcomes.”

How might coronavirus impact neurodivergent people?

The coronavirus pandemic has affected everyone in different ways, but many of the challenges facing neurodivergent employees are the same as those who are

'not neurodivergent'. These could include:

- increased feelings of anxiety and worry
- disturbed sleep
- disruptions to work or school
- financial worries
- isolation and loneliness

But there are also some aspects of the pandemic that could affect neurodivergent individuals in particular. For example, some people with autism might not be able to wear a face covering because they can cause sensory overload. Despite being exempt, some have reported feeling vulnerable and being confronted and asked to leave public places for not wearing a face covering. If your employee struggles with communication and has returned to the physical work environment, having to wear a facemask in certain areas could make lip reading and registering facial expressions a challenge. It might help to try and arrange an exemption card or lanyard for people who feel this would be helpful and appropriate.

Some people with autism find comfort in structure and rituals. So they may find the disruption to daily routines and frequent changes to government guidelines very distressing. It might help to try to communicate clearly with them, and give them as much notice as possible ahead of any changes. Encourage them to maintain as much routine as possible, create new ones where they can and give them plenty of time to adjust.

Remote working during the pandemic has come with different advantages and disadvantages for everyone. While some individuals may prefer working from home in a quieter environment, it could also lead to less opportunity to connect and look out for each other's wellbeing. Relying heavily on technology such as computers, video calls virtual meetings or email could also be really difficult for neurodivergent employees. Think about the tools, technology and software you can invest in that might support them to work more effectively from home during this time.

Remember that many support services had to reduce their services during coronavirus, and many struggled with funding. So if your employee accesses support services for their condition, it's possible these might not be available right now. You can look out for your team by learning how to spot the signs of mental ill health, encouraging open conversations and signposting them to mental health support services if they need it.

9 out of 10

**autistic people worried
about their mental
health during lockdown.**



Source: Left stranded: The impact of coronavirus on autistic people and their families in the UK. National Autistic Society. www.autism.org, published September 2020

Resources.

Further information:

Neurodiversity at work. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development. www.cipd.co.uk, published February 2018.

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