



WORKPLACE WELLBEING

Chapter 1

Understanding Neurodivergence in the Workplace

Understanding Neurodivergence in the Workplace: Appreciating Different Ways of Thinking, Learning and Working

Different minds strengthen workplaces

Neuroinclusion begins with recognising that people can think, communicate, learn and work differently - and that these differences can bring both strengths and challenges.

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Understanding Neurodivergence in the Workplace

Every workplace is made up of people who think, communicate and solve problems in different ways. These differences are often recognised in personality, experience and professional background, but another important aspect of human diversity is neurological diversity.

Neurodivergence describes natural variations in the way the brain develops and processes information. It is an important part of human diversity and contributes to the wide range of talents, perspectives and approaches found within modern workplaces.

For many years, differences such as autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia and dyspraxia were viewed primarily through a medical lens, with emphasis placed on identifying deficits and reducing difficulties. While these conditions can present genuine challenges, there is increasing recognition that neurological differences are not simply problems to be fixed. They are differences that bring both strengths and challenges, depending on the individual and the environment in which they work.

Understanding neurodivergence helps organisations move away from asking, "How do we make this person fit our workplace?" towards asking, "How can we create a workplace where different minds can thrive?"

Creating neuroinclusive workplaces benefits everyone. Many of the adjustments that support neurodivergent employees also improve communication, flexibility and wellbeing for the wider workforce.

What Does Neurodivergence Mean?

The term neurodivergent describes individuals whose brains process information differently from what is considered typical or "neurotypical."

Neurodivergence is not a diagnosis itself. Instead, it is an umbrella term that includes a range of naturally occurring neurological differences.

- Autism
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Dyslexia
- Dyspraxia (Developmental Coordination Disorder)
- Dyscalculia
- Tourette syndrome
- Some language and learning differences

Every neurodivergent person is unique. Two people with the same diagnosis may have very different strengths, preferences and support needs.

Understanding Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity refers to the natural variation in human brains. Just as people differ in height, personality and culture, they also differ in how they:

- Learn.
- Process information.
- Solve problems.
- Communicate.

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- Regulate emotions.
 - Experience the world.
 - Respond to sensory information.

These differences are a normal part of human diversity. Neurodiversity recognises that there is no single "right" way for a brain to work.

Difference Rather Than Deficit

Historically, neurodevelopmental conditions have often been described in terms of deficits or impairments.

While it is important to acknowledge the very real difficulties many neurodivergent people experience, it is equally important to recognise strengths.

Viewing neurodivergence solely through a deficit-based model can lead to:

- Stigma.
- Reduced confidence.
- Lower expectations.
- Missed opportunities.
- Workplace discrimination.

A strengths-based approach recognises that many challenges arise not because someone is neurodivergent, but because workplaces have traditionally been designed around one way of thinking and working.

This does not mean difficulties should be ignored. Instead, it encourages organisations to reduce unnecessary barriers while valuing different perspectives.

Common Types of Neurodivergence

Although every individual is different, understanding some common characteristics can help improve awareness.

Autism

Autistic people may:

- Prefer clear and direct communication.
- Thrive with routine and predictability.
- Notice details others overlook.
- Develop deep expertise in areas of interest.
- Experience sensory sensitivities.
- Need additional processing time.
- Find unexpected change challenging.

Many autistic employees bring exceptional focus, honesty, creativity and analytical thinking to their roles.

ADHD

Employees with ADHD may:

- Generate creative ideas.
- Think quickly.
- Thrive in fast-paced environments.

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- Show enthusiasm and innovation.
 - Experience challenges with organisation, working memory or time management.
 - Find repetitive tasks difficult.
 - Hyperfocus on areas of interest.

With appropriate support, many individuals with ADHD excel in dynamic, creative and entrepreneurial roles.

Dyslexia

Dyslexia primarily affects reading, writing and processing written information. Many individuals demonstrate strengths in:

- Problem-solving.
- Creative thinking.
- Big-picture thinking.
- Innovation.
- Visual reasoning.

Simple workplace adjustments often make a significant difference.

Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia affects coordination and motor planning. Some individuals may experience challenges with:

- Organisation.
- Sequencing tasks.
- Time management.
- Coordination.

Many also demonstrate resilience, creativity and strong determination.

Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia affects numerical understanding and mathematical processing. Supportive strategies and assistive technology can help individuals manage numerical tasks effectively while allowing other strengths to flourish.

Every Neurodivergent Person Is Different

It is important to avoid assumptions. Two autistic colleagues may have completely different sensory preferences. Two employees with ADHD may organise themselves in entirely different ways.

Diagnosis does not define personality, interests or ability. Listening to the individual remains the most effective way to understand what support they may find helpful.

Strengths Neurodivergent Employees Often Bring

Although everyone is unique, neurodivergent employees frequently contribute strengths such as:

- Creativity.
- Innovation.
- Analytical thinking.
- Pattern recognition.

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- Attention to detail.
 - Persistence.
 - Curiosity.
 - Honesty.
 - Problem-solving.
 - Original thinking.
 - Hyperfocus.
 - Strong memory in specialist areas.

These strengths can become significant assets when workplaces provide appropriate support.

Common Workplace Challenges

Challenges often arise when workplace expectations do not match an individual's way of processing information. Examples include:

- Sensory overload.
- Busy open-plan offices.
- Constant interruptions.
- Ambiguous instructions.
- Frequent unexpected change.
- Excessive multitasking.
- Long unstructured meetings.
- Difficulties with executive functioning.
- Social expectations that rely heavily on unwritten rules.

Many of these barriers can be reduced through thoughtful workplace design rather than expecting the individual to adapt alone.

Myths About Neurodivergence

Myth: Neurodivergent people cannot work effectively.

Reality: Many neurodivergent individuals have highly successful careers across every profession.

Myth: Everyone with the same diagnosis is the same.

Reality: Neurodivergence exists on a spectrum of experiences, strengths and support needs.

Myth: Adjustments are expensive.

Reality: Many workplace adjustments cost little or nothing, such as providing written instructions, allowing flexible working patterns or offering noise-reducing headphones.

Myth: Supporting neurodivergent employees only benefits a small number of people.

Reality: Inclusive practices often improve communication, flexibility and wellbeing for the entire workforce.

Why Understanding Matters

When organisations understand neurodivergence they are more likely to:

- Reduce stigma.

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- Improve recruitment.
 - Increase staff retention.
 - Strengthen innovation.
 - Improve employee wellbeing.
 - Build psychological safety.
 - Encourage diverse thinking.
 - Improve team performance.

Employees who feel understood are more likely to contribute fully and confidently.

What Employers Can Do

Creating a neuroinclusive workplace begins with small but meaningful changes. Employers can:

- Increase awareness through education.
- Use clear and accessible communication.
- Offer flexible ways of working where possible.
- Review recruitment processes for unnecessary barriers.
- Encourage conversations about workplace adjustments.
- Focus on strengths as well as support needs.
- Foster an inclusive and respectful workplace culture.

These actions benefit not only neurodivergent employees but everyone within the organisation.

Key Takeaways

- Neurodivergence describes natural differences in how people think, learn and process information.
- Neurodiversity recognises these differences as a normal part of human variation.
- Neurodivergent people bring both strengths and challenges to the workplace.
- Inclusive workplaces focus on reducing barriers rather than changing individuals.
- Every neurodivergent person is unique and should never be defined solely by a diagnosis.
- Small, thoughtful workplace adjustments can make a significant difference.
- Understanding neurodivergence creates more innovative, supportive and successful organisations.

Final Thoughts

Understanding neurodivergence is about more than recognising diagnoses, it is about recognising people. Every employee brings a unique way of thinking, learning and contributing to the workplace, and embracing these differences strengthens teams, improves innovation and creates more inclusive organisations.

A neuroinclusive workplace does not expect everyone to think or work in the same way. Instead, it values flexibility, clear communication and a willingness to adapt environments so that individuals can perform at their best. When organisations move beyond stereotypes and focus on removing barriers, neurodivergent employees are better able to use their strengths, manage challenges and contribute fully to the success of the team.



Ultimately, recognising neurological diversity is not simply about meeting legal obligations or implementing workplace adjustments. It is about creating a culture where different ways of thinking are respected, supported and seen as an essential part of a healthy, diverse and successful workforce.