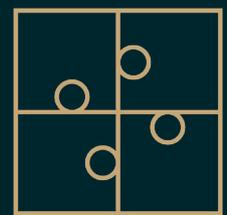
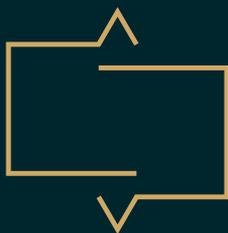
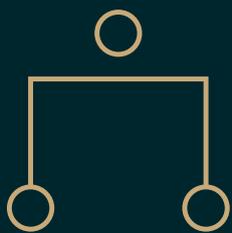


NEURODIVERSITY:  
ESSENTIAL FOR  
THE FUTURE OF WORK





# Neurodiversity: Essential for the future of work

Neurodiversity is fast becoming a key priority for companies to succeed in today's world of work. Combining the terms 'neurological' and 'diversity', it includes those who are diagnosed or identify as autistic, ADHD, dyslexic, and DCD (dyspraxia), and is constantly evolving.

Awareness of neurodiversity has increased in recent years. However, research suggests that many companies are not keeping pace. Only 16% of autistic adults are in full-time paid employment in the UK, compared with 47% of disabled people and 80% of non-disabled people. Dyslexic people are up to five times more likely to be unemployed, and dyslexic thinkers make up to four in ten of the unemployed population. With 10% to 16% of the population affected by dyslexia, even if we take the lowest figure, this equates to around 7.3 million people in the UK. Globally this is 700 million people.<sup>2</sup>

Moreover, many neurodiverse people who are working are not in mainstream employment. 35% of entrepreneurs identify themselves as being dyslexic, signalling that businesses are failing to attract or retain a significant pool of ambitious and success-driven talent.<sup>3</sup>

One of the greatest barriers is that neurodiversity simply isn't included in many companies' diversity and inclusion strategies - with the majority focusing on gender, ethnicity, and cultural background. Despite this, there appears to be some progress, illustrated by The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)'s definition of the term:

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**“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.”<sup>4</sup>**

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Companies are beginning to see the benefits of incorporating neurodiversity into their recruitment and inclusion strategies. Neurodivergent people often possess creativity, lateral thinking, a different perspective, highly specialised skills, and strict consistency. Hiring with neurodiversity in mind means building stronger, more innovative, and enriched teams. While social justice is often the initial driver, inclusion and diversity is becoming essential for organisations to achieve a competitive advantage and a key enabler of growth.

## Making neurodiversity part of your inclusion strategy

An estimated 15% of the UK's population is neurodivergent. This is nearly 1 in 7 people, so organisations either already have employees with a range of neurodivergent conditions or undoubtedly will in the future.

Some organisations have already begun to prioritise neurodiversity. Microsoft, JPMorgan Chase, EY, BT, Google, SAP, BT, Ford, and GCHQ are among some of the big names all running neurodiversity-at-work initiatives, or in the process of developing one.

Benefits these companies found by making neurodiversity integral to their inclusion policies include:



### Creativity & lateral thinking

Cognitive diversity brings a range of perspectives.



### Building stronger teams

Diverse thinking increases creativity and innovation within teams.



### Gaining competitive advantage

Deloitte's Millennial Survey found 78% of global HR and business leaders believe diversity and inclusion bring a competitive advantage.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the increase in awareness of the advantages that neurodiversity can bring to business, many organisations still have a long way to go. A CIPD poll found that 72% of HR professionals in the UK stated neurodiversity wasn't considered a part of their organisation's people management practices.<sup>7</sup>

LinkedIn's Workforce Diversity Report from 2018 revealed a similar trend, with less than a third of companies considering any disability in their diversity and inclusion programmes.<sup>8</sup>





In 2020, B+C's parent company, the Adecco Group, carried out a survey of 1,010 UK workers across a range of industries. The aim was to better understand awareness of neurodiversity amongst employers and employees:

**12%**

identified as neurodivergent, close to the percentage of the UK population

**53.6%**

had never heard of the term neurodiversity

**23%**

worked closely with neurodivergent colleagues

**20%**

had been made aware of neurodiversity by their employers

**65%**

would feel comfortable telling their employers they are neurodivergent

**63%**

would feel comfortable asking for reasonable adjustments

The data was analysed according to gender, age, industry, seniority, and company size to gauge how people's awareness of neurodiversity varied across the UK.

It revealed that younger generations are more likely to have heard about neurodiversity, with around 70% of 16–24-year-olds having heard of the term. This percentage decreased as the age brackets rose, concluding in the 55+ category where only 19% had heard of neurodiversity.

The survey also delved into where respondents had heard the term. 18% of 16–24-year-olds came across it through their work, 12% via the media, and nearly 13% outside of work. In contrast, only 3% of the +55 demographic had heard about neurodiversity outside the workplace. One in five participants between the ages of 16–24 identified as neurodivergent, compared to one in 30 over the age of 44.

This indicates that the conversation about neurodiversity is more prevalent and more likely to occur outside the workplace among younger workers. Younger generations tend to be more socially conscious, and this extends to selecting an employer. According to the CIPD, both jobseekers, in particular millennials (who will make up around three quarters of the global workforce by 2025), prefer working with socially inclusive companies.<sup>9</sup>



## Which industries are leading the way in neurodiversity?

The Adecco Group's research revealed that the IT & Tech industry is most aware of neurodiversity. 64% of participants in the sector had heard the term, while 70% said they would feel fairly or very comfortable asking employers for changes to meet their needs. In contrast, within the Professional Services and Legal sector, only 36% had heard the term, and interestingly, only 40% within the Education sector had.

Impressively, more than half of those in IT & Tech who had heard of the term neurodiversity, had done so through their employer. This suggests that organisations in this sector are the ones leading the way in educating their employees on diversity and inclusion. This is likely due to the fact that neurodivergence is more common in the IT industries, where the skills required for many of these roles are more common in neurodivergent individuals.

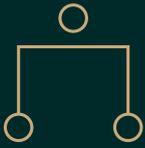
However, neurodiversity isn't restricted to IT and tech roles. Just like neurotypical individuals, neurodiverse people possess unique skills, and shouldn't be universally labelled with the same attributes. Companies outside the tech sector have also begun to see the advantages of hiring with neurodiversity in mind.

Direct Line Group, Britain's leading insurer and a FTSE 100 company, established their 'Neuro-Diversity Network' in 2018. By speaking to neurodivergent employees about their experiences, the group was able to better understand challenges these individuals faced and how this impacted their jobs. A more open culture was formed, while raising awareness of how neurodiversity benefits business. An autistic employee was selected to rethink a struggling process and implement a training strategy, due to his innovation skills. His creative approach resulted in the audit pass rate rising from 66% to 91% and is now being implemented globally.<sup>10</sup>

The multinational investment bank, JP Morgan Chase, launched its Autism at Work initiative in 2015. Just 6 months into the initiative, the Autism at Work employees were 92% more productive, and 48% faster, than their neurotypical colleagues. What began as a four-person pilot has grown to over 150 employees across 8 countries. The program now has an impressive 99% retention rate.<sup>11</sup> The company recently started using pymetrics games – which measure cognitive, social, and behavioural attributes – in their interview process. This makes the hiring process more inclusive and enables JP Morgan Chase to better match candidates to the right role.



# Rethinking the hiring process



19% of employees feel that revealing they are neurodivergent to a potential employer would definitely affect their career opportunities, while 42% feel it might.<sup>12</sup> This indicates there is still room for improvement in hiring processes across the board to prevent dissuading neurodivergent talent. The Harvard Business Review's example reflects this perfectly. John was highly skilled in data analytics, with a rare combination of mathematical and software development skills. Despite this and having two master's degrees – both with honours – he was unemployed for over two years. His skills were in high demand, but he couldn't make it through the hiring process.<sup>13</sup>

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**“John” is a composite of neurodivergent people, and this experience is all too common. Many hiring processes currently have the unintentional effect of excluding neurodivergent talent. The CIPD cites reasons such as “the style of job descriptions discouraging applications, unempathetic interviewers, a lack of eye contact or unconventional body language at interview, or from neurodivergent applicants being confused or rushed by additional assessments or tests.”<sup>14</sup>**

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UK intelligence agency GCHQ have made neurodivergence a part of their hiring process. From the beginning of the recruitment process, candidates can disclose an impairment and are invited to discuss any reasonable adjustments they may require. Part of onboarding involves a 'Disclosure Document', which allows new employees to disclose information comfortably. As well as providing a clear description of the employee's condition in relation to their role, it indicates adjustments that can improve performance. This enables clear, concise communication for both the new hire and the onboarding team.

In order to create recruitment processes with neurodiversity in mind, making these adjustments and highlighting your organisation's commitment to diversity is key. Telling positive stories of existing neurodivergent employees sends a message that yours is an inclusive organisation, which will attract and tap into a wider talent pool.

Neurodiversity can be incorporated into your hiring strategy by taking these steps:

**Cut the jargon** – write job descriptions using concise language that is understandable for everyone.

**Create clear job descriptions** – show the exact skills and experience required for the role and avoid ambiguity.

**Avoid tough criticism** – focusing on a spelling error or incorrect grammar may dissuade talent.

**Don't penalise the past** – neurodivergent candidates may have education or work gaps due to a lack of support.

**Outline policies** – create a comprehensive section on your website that explains your neurodivergent policies to attract more diverse talent.

**Provide training** – ensure your interviewers and hiring managers are neurodiverse aware, so they don't negatively judge behaviour such as a lack of eye contact or unconventional body language.



## Shifting workplace culture and environment

Whilst there is no one-size-fits-all approach to creating a more neurodivergent-friendly working environment, there are certain factors to consider. For example, many neurodivergent workers have elevated levels of sensory sensitivity. This means that brightly lit or loud spaces can cause distraction and anxiety, so adjusting these factors can make a significant difference.

The GMB trade union suggests further measures to enhance the workplace for neurodiverse employees. These include scheduling breaks during longer meetings for an employee with ADHD, providing a second computer screen for a dyslexic employee, agreeing upon a later start and finish time for an autistic employee to avoid rush hour, or adjusting the dress code for a dyspraxic employee.

Good management is also vital in fostering a more neurodivergent-friendly environment. Sean Gilroy, Head of Cognitive Design, BBC Design and Engineering explains,

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**“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.”<sup>15</sup>**

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Providing the right training and education to ensure managers are neurodiverse aware is essential in enhancing the culture of the workplace as a whole. According to the Adecco Group survey, 75% of senior managers and directors have heard of the term neurodiversity. This was through either their company or the media. However, while awareness is prevalent in senior positions, it is necessary to clearly communicate the best ways to help neurodivergent workers.

By setting up leaders with the right tools to foster neurodiversity, every employee will benefit from greater awareness, a more cohesive team, and alignment of goals.

## The future workplace with neurodiversity in mind

The Adecco Group’s study last year, *Resetting Normal*, looked at the attitudes of workers across eight countries: Australia, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Spain, the UK, and the USA. A key takeaway was that 74% of workers want a combination of office-based and remote working.<sup>16</sup> As restrictions ease and offices reopen, the desire for hybrid working remains.

Since the onset of the pandemic, employers have had to adjust processes to maintain a comfortable and safe working environment for their employees. Those who are neurodiverse may require additional adjustments and these are highlighted during times of crisis. These could include providing noise-cancelling headphones, an app for managing tasks, or having smaller online meetings to ensure everyone has the opportunity to speak without interruption. The lack of structure and change in routine can make work especially difficult for neurodiverse employees. Deliver meeting agendas ahead of time, set precise deadlines, and hold meetings at the same time each week to provide clarity while working remotely.

While these adjustments can be challenging, this shift in workplace practices has also brought benefits for both employers and employees. Flexible working has created more opportunities, providing access to more diverse talent. Being able to adapt to suit individual needs is crucial here – for example, some neurodivergent workers may want to be in the office more to get into a routine, while others may prefer remote working as they can focus better on tasks from home. Employers who embrace this flexibility will be more accessible to talent and be able to tap into a wider, more diverse talent pool. As David Blackburn, Chief People Officer at the Financial Services Compensation Scheme (FSCS), explains,

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**“It creates so much more choice, and it immediately opens up a new range of options.”<sup>17</sup>**

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While hybrid working is here to stay, it doesn't mean the death of the office. Many companies have already changed their office spaces to align with restrictions, such as making sure every meeting room is video conference ready and implementing social distancing measures. The key to a successful working space going forward will be how we use it. The office should be viewed as a destination for collaboration and connection.

## A report by HOK's Workplace group outlined changes that can be implemented to create a neurodiverse-friendly office space:<sup>18</sup>

### Delineating spaces

using focal points such as artwork or combining common elements to help with orientation and create a sense of order.

### Designing spaces for purpose

making sure a variety of settings is provided, so employees can choose which one best suits their task. Examples are large breakout rooms for socialising, quiet areas for reflection, enclosed spaces for focus, and places dedicated to meetings and phone calls.

### Using dividers

breaking up open spaces with dividers to block noise and distraction.

### Creating new workstations

adding hotdesks in low traffic areas to allow employees to work flexibly in a calmer environment.

These adjustments will benefit all employees, not just those who are neurodiverse. As diversity and inclusion architect Toby Mildon explains,

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**“If we design workplaces with different impairments, disabilities and conditions at the forefront of our thinking, we will make workplaces better for everybody.”<sup>19</sup>**

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## The future workplace with neurodiversity in mind

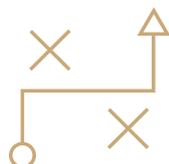
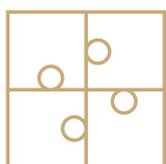
As organisations become increasingly neurodiverse-aware, making adjustments will be essential. From recruiting and onboarding, to where and how we work, a rethink with neurodiversity in mind is certain to bring about a change for the better. Neurodiverse workers will gain more opportunities to go further in their careers, while being able to work to the best of their ability in a supportive working environment.

Organisations can tap into a wider, more diverse talent pool and attract more candidates due to their inclusive approach. All employees can benefit from greater flexibility and enhanced workspaces. By maintaining focus on neurodiversity, organisations will thrive in the future of work.



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