



## "Tapping The Hidden Talent Pool"

### **Eye Contact & Facial Expressions**

The eyes are central to nonverbal communication and reveal a great deal about what we are really thinking and feeling from moment to moment. In our society, eye contact indicates someone's involvement and attention. The ability to "look someone in the eye" suggests trust and truthfulness; and in the business world, establishing eye contact shows confidence.

However, some Neurodivergent employees might have trouble making or maintaining eye contact, which is often interpreted as a sign of laziness, dishonesty, or lack of interest. Overall, it is important to keep in mind that Neurodivergent individuals are not avoiding eye contact as a choice, but rather because of a neurological difference. Facial expressions constantly change during communication, so some Neurodivergent people may find them distracting and difficult to follow. Some may find it painful to maintain eye contact, because doing so makes them anxious.

Much of our social development involves learning to understand the needs and feelings of others through observing the subtle differences among the thousands of combinations of facial expressions and tone of voice. Furthermore, we utilise these same tools to signal our own thoughts and feelings in response to others. Facial expressions are remarkably similar across different cultures, and our ability to use them to spontaneously express our feelings is largely innate. However, for some Neurodivergent people the lack of eye contact can make it difficult for them to learn which facial expressions are deemed suitable for various situations. Additionally, they may exhibit inappropriate or unusual facial expressions, such as excessive smiling, in response to anxiety or a scowl in large group meetings where they feel uncomfortable.

### **Our Advice**

- Never force a Neurodivergent employee to look directly at you, as it may be easier for some Neurodivergent colleagues to communicate without eye contact.
- Suggest looking at a more neutral part of the face, such as the nose or glasses, to give the impression of eye contact, or use something visual, such as a report or list, to create a common focal point.
- Provide a company directory with photos or suggest an employee maintain a list of people with identifying characteristics on their smartphone for easy reference if they struggle to recognise faces or names.
- Ask them what their preferred method of communication style is. If consented to share this with the wider organisation.