

Frequently Asked Questions

Who we are.

My name is Oliver Fenghour and I am the Director and Founder of Advance: The Disability Consultants. I have a form of Autism known as Asperger's Syndrome. I was diagnosed by a Professor of Neurology at Great Ormond Street at the age of 10. I was diagnosed with Dyspraxia at the age of 4 and I identify as Neurodivergent. Upon leaving school at 16 I struggled for many years to find employment and found there was often a distinct lack of awareness and understanding of Neurodiversity.

Eventually I was helped by the disability charity Mencap into employment with J Sainsburys PLC. Mencap supported me successfully in the workplace for about three years, yet with the financial crash in 2008 and the consequent austerity that followed, meant that the support I had received in the workplace was subsequently removed. I was fortunate that by the time my support in the workplace was removed I was functioning well in the workplace due to the excellent awareness and understanding that my employers and colleagues had of my needs and requirements as a Neurodivergent Adult.

Although, my employment experience post-Sainsburys has been markedly different and too often I have been seen as Oliver the disability and by definition a workplace problem which needed fixing and not Oliver an individual who was capable of adding value to an organisation.

It is estimated that globally according to the CIPD that only 24% of HR professionals have a good working knowledge of Neurodiversity in their workplaces. Yet 76% of HR professionals surveyed have stated that they are keen to further their knowledge of Neurodiversity to ensure that Neurodivergent employees can have access to meaningful opportunities in the modern workplace.

My primary objective of founding Advance: The Disability Consultants is to help give organisations the confidence, knowledge and skills required to successfully recruit, retain, support, and develop Neurodivergent talent in the workplace. As a specialist Neurodiversity consultancy business, we offer Neurodiversity Lunch and learn training for all employees, HR & Recruitment training sessions and workshops, Leadership and Management training sessions and a Neurodiversity Ambassador training programme all designed to ensure that your organisation has the right tools required to become a Neurodiversity Confident Employer.

Since founding Advance: The Disability Consultants in 2019 we have worked with organisations in the UK, USA, Australia, Argentina, Central America, Germany, Sweden, and Singapore to understand and learn more about Neurodiversity and Neurodivergent people and we have helped support organisations as diverse as The Rainforest Alliance and eBay to become Neurodiversity Confident Employers.

At Advance: The Disability Consultants we work with organisations ranging from FTSE 100 and NASDAQ 500 companies to SMEs and public sector organisations. To help make them Neurodiversity Confident employers. It doesn't matter where you are in the world, we work with you to help give you the skills, confidence, and knowledge to become a world-leading Neurodiversity Confident Employer in your industry. Can you really afford to miss out on the next Steve Jobs or Bill Gates in your industry?

Frequently Asked Questions

At Advance: The Disability Consultants we recognise that the conversation around Neurodiversity is still in many respects in its infancy. Yes, many people have heard terms such as “Neurodivergent” “Neurodiverse” “Neurominorities” to name a few but society and the modern workplace has still yet to fully accept, celebrate and embrace Neurodiversity and Neurodivergent people. However, it is important to note that the conversation around Neurodiversity and Neuroinclusion is improving all the time as more people get diagnosed and more people share and talk about their Neurodivergence the greater our levels of understanding of Neurodiversity in the workplace and

society as a consequence. The Neurodiversity Movement founded by the Australian Sociologist Judy Singer in 1998 came about as an umbrella term to help better represent the Autism community has come to define all forms of cognitive diversity and this is something we need to embrace across all aspects of our workplaces, cultures and societies. Below you will see a series of frequently asked questions which are designed to support managers, HR Professionals, individuals seeking a diagnosis and family members wanting to learn more about Neurodiversity:

1) How do I go about getting a diagnosis of Autism and ADHD?

Firstly, you will need to go to your doctors and be referred to a consultant. My advice would be to not take no for an answer and ensure that you are referred (particularly) if you are determined to get a medical diagnosis. A consultant should then refer you onto a Neurologist or Neuropsychiatrist these are the only medical experts who have the required medical knowledge and expertise to be able to give you a formal medical diagnosis. I would advise ensuring that your diagnosis is properly explained and that if you are able to have some catchup sessions with the Neurologist and Neuropsychiatrist as this will help answer any questions that you may have. As a note of caution the wait time for a medical diagnosis for ADHD and Autism is at this moment in time upwards of three years.

2) Does a self-diagnosis have as much as validity as a medical diagnosis?

Increasingly we are seeing that more people are choosing to go down the route of self-diagnosis. In part this is because the wait times for a diagnosis of most Neurological differences is running into the years. Furthermore, there are many people that have come to realise because of increased awareness that they might be Neurodivergent. All too often we hear from people who tell us statements such as “I now understand why I have always struggled to fit in the workplace” “My marriage fell apart in my 30s and I now know why” “I have always wondered I am really good at the technical side of the job but struggle with small talk”. These are just some of the examples that we have received from employees working in organisations. It is also important to note that there are many people who have the view that a medical diagnosis won't tell them anything that they don't already know about themselves. Organisations have also realised that whether a person has a medical or self-diagnosis that they should not be judged differently and that the diagnosis process is deeply subjective and will mean different things to different people.

3) Should I disclose to my employer that I am Neurodivergent?

From my own personal experiences when I first entered the world of employment I actively disclosed that I had Autism and Dyspraxia on job applications. Unsurprisingly, at that time not one single employer responded with an offer of an interview. When I didn't disclose I ended up with several interviews. I can remember the panic in hiring managers eyes when I told them that I had Autism and Dyspraxia. Unsurprisingly, I never heard back from any of these employers. Thankfully these days things are not as bad. However, I personally believe that disclosure is highly subjective and will mean different things to different people. If you have good working relationships with your colleagues and managers and feel that they will not judge you differently, absolutely disclose. I would advise be clear on who you want to share your diagnosis with and be clear with your colleagues and managers who you want to know that information. If being Neurodivergent makes no difference to your working life and you haven't chosen to disclose that is absolutely your right to not disclose if you do not want to. Your organisation cannot force you to disclose nor can they seek to create a culture of disclosure. It is also important to remember that a person may not be aware that they are Neurodivergent. The employer does not by law have the right to ask questions whether a person has a disability or not. Good managers and colleagues will see you as a human being and a regular member of the team so disclosing at whatever stage of your employment journey should not see you treated differently or negatively as a consequence. The same goes for whether you have chosen to not disclose you still have the right to be treated fairly like any other employee in the workplace.

4) Do I have to provide workplace accommodations for an employee who has not disclosed they are Neurodivergent?

If an employee has chosen not to disclose that is their right not to do so. You must never ask a Neurodivergent employee whether they have a disability as this is illegal. We also do not want to "out" Neurodivergent employees and force a culture of disclosure as there will be a substantial number of reasons why a person has chosen not to disclose and this must be respected. I would advise putting the accommodations in place under the principles of a universal design framework. Workplace accommodations if implemented correctly can benefit all employees in your organisation not just those who are Neurodivergent. The only instances where we might not implement workplace accommodations is where the cost to the business might be so substantial that it is not potentially realistic to implement. But what is and isn't affordable will mean different things to different organisations.

5) How do I start the conversation around Neurodiversity in my organisation?

Believe it or not just starting the conversation around Neurodiversity is one of the hardest things to do. But often gets overlooked by many organisations. To often the conversation around Neurodiversity often feels rather tokenistic. Examples of this will be organisations hosting events for Neurodiversity Celebration Week and Autism Awareness Month but seemingly not doing anything the rest of the year and we this sadly time and time again. As human beings we fear what we don't know or understand and as societies we are increasingly more fearful of asking questions as we are fearful of causing offence. This principal very much applies to Neurodiversity. Yet, this need not be the case. Simple questions such as asking a colleague who has disclosed what does it mean to be Neurodivergent? Or asking where to find useful resources on Neurodiversity are good starting points. Ask about learning styles and preferred ways of working is also helpful. But most importantly treat a Neurodivergent employee like you would any other employee in the workplace. Get to know us on a personal level and that will help build the professional relationship.

6) What do I do if I have employees who do not see the relevance of Neurodiversity in my organisation?

Unfortunately, in every organisation there will be employees who do not see the importance or relevance and that happens in every workplace. However, it is important we call in behaviours that are ableist and discriminatory towards Neurodivergent people in our organisations. If you see an employee behaving in a way that is seen as ableist. Have a conversation in private with that individual. Emphasis to them what is wrong with their behaviour. Note we are not asking people to change their personalities but we are asking them to think about their actions and how it might impact others in the workplace. Always ensure that the conversation is private, constructive, involves active listening and gets that employee to think differently about Neurodiversity and Neurodivergent people. It is also important to note that all employees in organisations should attend and have the right to attend Neurodiversity awareness workshops. We do not want to foster a culture of diversity and exclusion and the conversation around Neurodiversity should include all employees.

7) If a Neurodivergent employee refuses to have workplace accommodations, what do I do?

Ultimately, at the end of the day once you have met one person who is Neurodivergent you have met one person who is Neurodivergent. It is important to remember that if an employee does not want support in the workplace that we cannot force them to have support if they do not want it. If this is the case look at the reasons and factors why perhaps they do not want this support? Are they flourishing in their role, not all Neurodivergent employees will need support in the workplace so bear that in mind. Perhaps that person has not accepted that they are Neurodivergent, and although they may have shared they worry about being treated differently by colleagues and managers. Perhaps they have been dismissed from previous jobs and struggle with confidence and low self-esteem and worry that if they are given workplace accommodations they might be dismissed from this job based on previous negative experiences. It is also important to note that not every employee who is Neurodivergent will need workplace accommodations and many Neurodivergent people flourish in the workplace without accommodations. So, if you are going to provide workplace accommodations always take a person-centred approach but don't force the issue if a Neurodivergent employee refuses workplace accommodations just like any other employee it is our right to do so.

8) Where can I get additional information as a line manager to learn more about Neurodiversity in my organisation?

Firstly, is it important to attend awareness workshops on Neurodiversity as they are a good starting point for driving awareness and understanding around Neurodiversity in the workplace. If you have colleagues who are Neurodivergent in your organisation and they have disclosed and are happy to share ask questions. Say less and listen more. Perhaps your organisation as a Neurodiversity staff engagement group or employee network. I would strongly advocate for attending events and meetings that they have during the year. You don't have to be Neurodivergent or directly affiliated with Neurodiversity to be a Neurodivergent ally in your organisation. Recommended reading lists, videos and podcasts are another very useful outlet to further your own knowledge about Neurodiversity. I would also advise listen and learn forums for line managers and leaders to listen to Neurodivergent colleagues to understand how your organisation can be more Neuroinclusive and what as leaders you need to do differently to be a part of this journey.

9) How often should I have performance reviews with Neurodivergent employees in my team? Do these need to be more often than Neurotypical colleagues?

It is important to take a person-centred approach when seeking to understand and support Neurodivergent employees in your teams. Some Neurodivergent employees will thrive without any support in the workplace and the performance review process for them will reflect that. However, some of us may need a little bit more support and it is important to recognise this. One of the biggest mistakes organisations frequently make is that they fail to understand that a Neurodivergent individuals needs and requirements will evolve and adapt over time. So, perhaps a workplace accommodation for incandescent lighting is no longer an issue as your whole office has replaced fluorescent lighting with incandescent lighting as one example. So, when we look at the performance review process we should be looking to ensure that workplace accommodations are consistent and currently in line with that individuals requirements at that moment in time. Performance reviews should be well structured, regular and consistent with a clearly defined agenda and done in a timely fashion. Casual, poorly structured performance reviews without an agenda and discussion points are to be avoided at all costs. The focus on performance reviews should be emphasising the positives of performance first. See weaknesses as learning opportunities and work with the Neurodivergent employee to help them achieve all their goals and objectives. Avoid a numbering or calibration system which compares to Neurodivergent employees to other employees in your organisation as all employees in your organisation will learn new skills and tasks at different speeds and this process has the effect of marginalising Neurodivergent employees who have initially slower processing speeds when learning new tasks.

10) How do I build a strong relationship with Neurodivergent employees that I line manage?

The important thing to think about is get to know us human beings. What are likes and dislikes? What are our interests outside of work? What do we like about the role we do in your organisation? What are our strengths and weaknesses? What could the organisation do differently to learn about Neurodiversity in the workplace? These are all the questions you must be considering in order to learn about who we are as human beings and employees in your organisation. If you can get to know us on a personal level then the foundations for a strong professional working relationship will naturally follow as a consequence. Perhaps the

role in your organisation is our first ever job. Perhaps we have had long periods of unemployment and this is the first job where we have really been valued as Oliver a human being. Perhaps we have had lots of bouts of short-term employment because organisations have seen us as a disability and therefore a problem. These are all factors to consider when thinking about you build a personal relationship with us in your organisation. It is also important to note don't try and force the conversation no conversation = no conversation. Allow the working relationship to naturally develop over time and by getting to us know on a personal level you will have a much better understand of Neurodiversity and what it means to be Neurodivergent.