



Creating a Neuroinclusive Workplace

When creating a Neuroinclusive workplace it is important to consider that just as society is diverse in gender, race and sexual orientation so is society cognitively diverse. As human beings we all think, process, understand and interpret information in different ways. So, by definition Neurodiversity refers to the concept that Neurological differences such as Autism and Dyspraxia are the result of a normal variation in the way the brain works. Put, simply in the 21st century world that we live in, Neurodiversity is another aspect of human diversity which must be understood, accepted, and embraced.

As the Founding Director of Advance: The Disability Consultants I was diagnosed with Dyspraxia in 1989 and Autism in 1995 when back then the conceptual term Neurodiversity would not have registered in the mainstream consciences of the global world we live in. What is more and more interesting is that more and more people are recognising that they may well be Neurodivergent. Thoughts and questions for many arise such as why I have struggled to stay in the same job for any length of time, why I have always struggled to make friends and why I have always felt different have led many to obtain successful diagnoses indicating that they are Neurodivergent. Yet, this has only been possible because our workplaces and by definition our societies are having conversations and discussions to drive awareness of Neurodiversity in the societal mainstream.

However, it is important to note that when you have met one person who is Neurodivergent you have met one person who is Neurodivergent. As a society we like to fit people into categories, boxes, and labels as it fits with our normal societal orders and structures. Yet, Neurodiversity and by

definition Neurodivergent people do not fit into these structures and categories. By labelling people who are Neurodivergent as disabled, different, or somehow disordered can lead to societal and employment marginalisation which can see many people who are Neurodivergent confined to the peripheries of society as a consequence. Labels often focus on what individuals cannot do and lead to a culture of ableism and disablement of Neurodivergent people, instead of focusing on their considerable strengths and weaknesses in the workplace. Yet, creating Neuroinclusive workplaces need not be onerous and often simple adjustments and changes can make a world of difference to Neurodivergent employees within your organisation.

Thus, it is important to think about some of the challenges that a Neurodivergent employee may experience in the workplace and what your organisation should consider doing differently to ensure that your workplace is Neuroinclusive. To ensure your organisation is committed to becoming a Neuroinclusive Employer we would advise the following:

Sensory Overload

Sensory overload in Neurodivergent individuals can mean that some Neurodivergent people are hyper-sensitive to light, touch, taste, sound, smell and noise. We would advise considering the following in your organisation:

- Workplaces with bright fluorescent lighting can cause sensory overload in some Neurodivergent people.
- Avoid lots of clutter, mess, and information overload as this can also cause sensory overload.
- Factor in that some Neurodivergent individuals might not be able to filter out background noise. This can vary from a loud meeting taking place or noisy team members amplifying the workplace noise which might be too much for a Neurodivergent employee to cope with.
- Some Neurodivergent individuals might have an over-stimuli to touch, taste, sound, and smell. Avoid putting them near canteen areas if this is the case.
- Consider that some Neurodivergent employees might require a need for extra personal space in the workplace. Do not take this personally, as people being close to them might make them feel uncomfortable.
- Also consider that some Neurodivergent individuals might be under-sensitive to sensory input and might be in too closer proximity to others. Often without realising they are invading other individual's personal space.

The Office Environment

Open plan office space can present considerable challenges for some Neurodivergent individuals. This can manifest itself in the form of noisy meetings, the constant ringing of phones and frequent interruptions from other colleagues which can cause stress and anxiety for Neurodivergent people in the workplace. Consider the following:

- Factor in that open plan offices will often create constant background noise which can be hard for a Neurodivergent individual to cope with and process. Noise such as constant use of the printer or scanner, the phone constantly going or perhaps a noisy meeting can impact a Neurodivergent individual's ability to cope in the workplace.
- Consider that some Neurodivergent individuals may struggle to concentrate on a 1-1 conversation if there is a lot of background noise.
- Consider that some Neurodivergent individuals might experience difficulty with transitioning during the working day and that interruptions in the form of phone calls or other colleagues can be enormously disruptive in this process.
- Factor in that hot desking can be problematic for some Neurodivergent employees who thrive of routine, structure and certainty in the workplace and that hot desking can raise anxiety and stress levels in some Neurodivergent employees.
- Consider that some Neurodivergent employees might work best with regular breaks away from their desk, this might cause annoyance and frustration for other colleagues.
- Avoid micromanaging and overbearing supervision as this can impact Neurodivergent individuals confidence and self-esteem to do their job to the highest possible standards.
- Clearly outline the unwritten social rules of engagement of the workplace if a Neurodivergent individual is struggling to navigate your organisation's political and social structures.

Creating an Inclusive Working Environment

To bring in the necessary changes to ensure that your organisation is Neuroinclusive need not be expensive. Most of the necessary requirements are often inexpensive and easy to implement. We would advise the following for organisations seeking to become Neuroinclusive:

- Consider workplace with incandescent or natural light as this will reduce sensory overload for some Neurodivergent employees.
- Turn off office equipment when not in use to minimise background noise.

- Where possible reduce background noise by closing door or windows, having designated quiet zones, ensuring that all meetings are held in specific meeting rooms in noisier parts of the building. Consider the use of doorstops if doors are noisy or slam a lot in your office. Factor in the use of vestibular boards and headphones to ensure that neurodivergent employees can focus on their work in designated quiet zones in your office.
- Make use of anti-glare screens and voice text software are easily accessible for all Neurodivergent employees should the require it.
- Consider the spacing and configuration of an open plan office and factor in the needs and requirements of your Neurodivergent employees when considering the layout of an open plan office.
- Consider the use of tinted lenses or glasses to reduce sensory overload for some Neurodivergent employees.
- Adapt office equipment if a Neurodivergent employee has fine motor difficulties such as Dyspraxia.
- Consider the use of workstation screen to block out background noise for Neurodivergent employees who experience sensory overload.
- Allow where it is reasonable to do so hybrid working if a Neurodivergent employee requests this.

Managing Change and Organising The Working Day

For some Neurodivergent people dealing with change and coping with the rigours of the working day can present some considerable challenges. Perhaps there is a sudden change to a planned meeting or perhaps they are required to be on a video call that they were not required to be on. This can cause heightened stress and anxiety for some Neurodivergent individuals. Consider the following adaptations if a Neurodivergent individual requests them:

- Factor in that Neurodivergent employees might struggle with transitioning do not expect them to constantly multi-task or reply instantly to emails. They might work better focusing on one task at a time.
- Manage change as far in advance as possible and explain context behind the change if necessary. Avoid sudden change as much as is feasibly possible.
- Help Neurodivergent employees manage their working day by creating RAG status trackers, post-it-notes, and templates of best practice documents to help them plan their working day.

- Have regular check-ins on projects and tasks to check for understanding to ensure that they understand the task and the expectations of the project.
- Setting timers or alarms might help some Neurodivergent employee's stay on track with tasks.
- Where relevant offer more frequent check ins to support individual Neurodivergent employees.
- 1-1 support can focus on breaking down tasks into smaller compartmentalised chunks so that the individual is comfortable with delivering the work required of them.
- Consider a workplace buddy or mentor where applicable to help support them with their working day.
- Avoid jargon and technical language where it is realistic and feasible to do so.

Making your Workplace Accessible

For some Neurodivergent individuals the workplace can seem inaccessible as they might struggle with overly bright computer screens, large reams of text that are difficult for them to understand and interpret and understanding the unspoken and unwritten social rules of the workplace. To ensure that you are Neuroinclusive as an organisation, consider the following:

- Use easy to use fonts such as Calibri and Gil Sans MT. Leave clear spaces between lines and use bold text as opposed to italics.
- Consider putting only relevant information into a task or project brief.
- Ensure that your corporate intranet is easily accessible and information is easy to locate.
- Consider the use of apps such as white noise and voice-text software which can be useful tools to help Neurodivergent employees stay on task in the workplace.

Communication Styles

It is worth noting that for some Neurodivergent traditional communication styles as large group meetings and conversations on the phone can present considerable challenges. Perhaps the pace of speech of a line manager and the language used can be full of jargon and vague statements which can be confusing and misleading for a Neurodivergent employee to understand. They might also be comfortable with eye contact and video conferencing meetings as well and this must be considered when changing communication styles in your organisation. As an organisation it is worth considering the following:

- Consider the pace of your speech when talking to a Neurodivergent employee and check for understanding. If necessary slow down your pace of speech that is more comfortable for them to listen to.
- Avoid metaphors and idioms, particularly if a Neurodivergent employee has difficulty understanding figurative language.
- If you have Teams or Zooms calls do not force the Neurodivergent employee to have their camera on during meetings and also factor in burnout, so where feasible do not force them to be on the call unless they need to be.
- Consider alternative forms of communication, particularly if they are not comfortable on the phone. Consider sending emails as an alternative.
- Do not force Neurodivergent employees to make eye contact with you. They may not be comfortable doing so. Suggest a neutral part of the face such as the chin or forehead to look at instead.
- Consider that some Neurodivergent employees might have different opinions and perspectives from the majority of employees in your organisation. Factor this in and be respectful and understanding of their opinions, regardless of whether you agree with them or not.
- Do not force Neurodivergent employees to be part of large group tasks or meetings. Consider smaller groups where they can get to know other team members individually. Thus, reducing their anxiety and stress.
- Consider that some Neurodivergent employee might struggle to make notes. Print and distribute information rather than expecting them to produce reams of notes.

Organisational policies and procedures

Fundamentally, organisational processes and policies are written by people who will often look, think and behave the same. By definition policies and procedures in organisations are inherently ableist in design and often fail to factor in Neurodivergent people and the different ways that they approach the modern workplace. As an organisation when adapting your policies and procedures to be Neuroinclusive, consider the following:

- Have a policy in place that limits the amount of screen time that employees have during the working day. Neurodivergent employees might struggle with a lack of concentration after a period of time, this might be more acute in individuals with reading needs.
- Always provide clear instructions for tasks.

- Have clear and up to date policies and procedures which are Neuroinclusive and do not risk discriminating Neurodivergent employees in your organisation. Make sure policies and procedures are jargon free and the language used is not ambiguous in any way.
- Have line managers who are good with people and willing to undergo Neurodiversity training to further their knowledge of Neurodiversity in the workplace.
- Create a universal design framework so that all employees have the opportunity to work in their own style.
- Ensure that all Neurodivergent employees know where to get support from on in the organisation. Particularly, if they have any concerns or worries.
- Create a coaching and supporting model to support all Neurodivergent employees in your organisation. Avoid chastising for mistakes and have a workplace culture that allows Neurodivergent employees to be their whole selves at work.