

FACTSHEET

SUPPORTING NEURODIVERSITY AT WORK

This factsheet aims to raise awareness of the barriers faced by neurodiverse people, set out the business case for employers to develop targeted interventions that support neurodiversity in the workplace, and inspire action by providing examples of existing best practice.

Introduction

Between 15-20% of people are neurodiverse – in real terms this is between 10 million to 13.5 million people.ⁱ Although awareness of neurodiversity has increased in recent years, many employers are not keeping pace. Neurodiverse people are much less likely to be employed than neurotypical people and many neurodiverse people who are working are not in mainstream employment.ⁱⁱ

29%

**of autistic adults are in employment
compared to 81% of non-disabled peopleⁱⁱⁱ**

Neurodiversity refers to the different ways that the brain functions, learns and processes information. Most people are neurotypical, meaning that their brain processes information in the way that society expects.

It highlights how people think about things in very different ways, with different interests, motivations, and perceptions. It can also lead to natural talents and weaknesses. For some people, the variations are more pronounced which can be disabling, depending on the environment.^{iv}

There are many different examples of neurodiversity such as:

- **Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)** which affects the ability to focus or complete tasks, cope with stress, and follow instructions.
- **Dyslexia and dyspraxia** have some overlapping symptoms, but whilst the former can lead to problems with literacy and numeracy, the latter can lead to motor coordination problems.
- **Autism Spectrum Disorder** can lead to problems with communication skills, difficulty in some unfamiliar situations, or struggling with emotional intelligence.

This guide focuses on these innate forms of neurodivergence and does not specifically cover acquired neurodivergence, such as through brain trauma – although many of the same principles of inclusion will apply. It is important to recognise that each neurodiverse condition will be experienced differently by every individual.

**“IF YOU’VE MET ONE PERSON WITH
AUTISM, YOU’VE MET ONE PERSON WITH
AUTISM”**

Dr Stephen Shore, Adelphi University



BARRIERS IN THE WORKPLACE

Although awareness of neurodiversity in society is growing, most UK workplaces are still structured around neurotypical ways of working. Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) poll showed that 72% of HR professionals did not include neurodiversity in their people management practices and 17% did not even know what it was.^v

As a result, neurodiverse jobseekers experience poorer employment outcomes than neurotypical people:

- Dyslexic people are up to five times more likely to be unemployed than neurotypical people.^{vi}
- Just one in five autistic people in the UK are in any form of employment.^{vii}
- 81% of those with a neurodiverse condition feel that there is an opportunity for them to be better supported at work.^{viii}

50%

of managers admit they would be uncomfortable hiring a neurodivergent individual^{ix}

Because every neurodivergent person is different and condition traits can often overlap, it is not possible to create an exhaustive list of challenges that they face in the hiring process. However, these are the common high-level barriers faced across the employment journey:

Lack of awareness

There are low levels of awareness among employers, managers, and the general workforce about neurodivergence with 73% of managers stating that they do not understand neurodivergence.^x

This situation is then compounded by widespread underdiagnosis. Despite one in eight people being neurodiverse, fewer than 50% know about it.^{xi}

Disclosure and discrimination

Of the people that have a formal diagnosis, many are unwilling to disclose information to their employers for fear of discrimination. This is backed up with research evidence that shows that over half have experienced discrimination.

52%

of neurodiverse people say that they have experienced discrimination during the selection process^{xii}

Poor workplace adjustments

Workplace adjustments often focus on the individual, rather than systemic problems within the organisation or they are poorly researched, evidenced and applied. The same research also showed that for many neurodiverse people, employers are rarely happy to make reasonable adjustments.^{xiii}

Standard recruitment practices

Traditional selection procedures do not work well for neurodiverse candidates. This is especially true of competency-based interviews – long considered the gold standard for HR departments – which have been shown to actively disadvantage autistic people.

This is because they will tend to answer open questions by narrating in detail what they did (as opposed to how or why they did it). In effect, these scenarios are more likely to showcase their weaknesses than highlight their strengths.^{xiv}

“THE INTERVIEW PROCESS IS DIFFICULT FOR ME. I EXPERIENCE SLOW PROCESSING SO CAN’T ALWAYS THINK OF ANSWERS TO QUESTIONS IN THE TIME ALLOWED. I OFTEN FORGET WHAT I’M TALKING ABOUT MID-SENTENCE”^{xv}

AchieveAbility survey respondent

BENEFITS OF NEURODIVERSITY

With over 10 million neurodiverse people in the UK, employers who do not support neurodiverse candidates are limiting their access to a huge pool of talent that could help them tackle skills shortages.

Access to skills

Because of the unique way in which neurodiverse people think and interpret information they are often skilled at:

- spotting patterns and analysing data
- thinking creatively and innovating
- solving problems and taking risks
- seeing things from a different perspective
- processing information quickly
- paying attention to detail and keeping things consistent.^{xvi}

A report by JPMorgan Chase also found that professionals in its Autism at Work initiative made fewer errors and were more productive than neurotypical employees.^{xvii}

Greater diversity

Improving support for neurodiversity will allow workplaces to become more diverse which in turn produces multiple benefits for businesses including:

- Greater diversity in how people think means that there will be more solutions to problems and greater levels of creativity.^{xviii}
- One study showed that someone with high inclusiveness was four times more likely to increase their personal growth compared to someone with low inclusiveness.^{xix}

“OUR AUTISTIC EMPLOYEES ACHIEVE, ON AVERAGE, 48% TO 140% MORE WORK THAN THEIR TYPICAL EMPLOYEES, DEPENDING ON THEIR ROLES”^{xx}

James Mahoney, JP Morgan

SPOTLIGHT ON: Deloitte

Deloitte has developed two interactive learning guides on neurodiversity for recruiters. Designed by resourcing professionals and neurodiversity experts, the guides help recruiters to improve their skill set and confidence when engaging with neurodiverse candidates.

The first workbook gives information about: neurodiversity within the context of recruitment; explaining the most common neurotypes and the strengths and challenges with which they are often associated; how to have confident conversations with a neurodivergent candidate; and some examples of workplace adjustments.

The second workbook provides an opportunity for recruiters to put what they've learnt into practice by applying their newfound skills and knowledge to three fictional candidate situations.

Launched in March 2022, 100% of Deloitte employees who've been through the training say that they feel more confident about talking to a neurodiverse candidate about their strengths and support needs as a result.

Simon Hallett, Director of Resourcing, explains: *“As a people centric business, we hire thousands of people every year and feel passionately about supporting our people. These guides are based on training that our Assessment Centre of Excellence designed for our own recruitment professionals so they could build confidence and feel better equipped to support neurodiverse candidates with their support needs. We received fantastic feedback from our team and wanted to share what we have learnt so more resourcing professionals, businesses and ultimately neurodiverse candidates can benefit.”*

The guides are available to download free of charge on Deloitte's [website](#).

SPOTLIGHT ON: Ricoh

Josh Watkins joined Ricoh as a Sales Executive in 2015. He was first diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in August 2020.

“ASD can be complex for people to understand – it has, therefore, been crucial that both my manager and the wider team fully understand what the condition is and how they can support me. Ricoh organised a training session on ASD for the HR team, Marco Pezzani, Director of Customer Service (RicoH UK’s Disability Executive Sponsor), my line manager and colleagues, educating themselves on the condition and ensuring that they could fully support me on my career journey. I now have people to speak to internally who empathise with my diagnosis and work with me in a non-judgemental way, to ensure my needs are understood and communicated where needed. I know and feel that I can speak openly about my diagnosis at Ricoh, and that I will be able to progress in my career here as a valued employee because of the actions they have taken. Working at Ricoh, I feel empowered in my position to work effectively despite my disability and to have a long-standing career going forward”.

Catherine Morrell, Inclusion & Wellbeing Manager at Ricoh, says:

“We recognise that neurodiverse employees have specific sets of skills and strengths that employers can really capitalise on. When Josh was first diagnosed with ASD, we worked closely with him and his line manager to fully understand what reasonable adjustments were required to enable him to continue being effective in his role. Open and honest conversation was crucial to identify Josh’s strengths as well as where additional support may be required. We also arranged for training to be provided to Josh’s management team and colleagues as well as a wider group of stakeholders including the HR team and our Disability Executive Sponsor to make sure we all developed a deeper understanding of the condition and, crucially, learnt how we can best support our current and future neuro-diverse employees. Going forward, our focus will be on raising awareness for neurodiversity and the unique skills that those candidates can bring to our organisation.”

EMPLOYERS LEGAL OBLIGATIONS

Notwithstanding the fact that supporting neurodiverse jobseekers and employees is the right thing to do from a social and business standpoint, there is also a legal requirement on employers.

Under the [Equality Act 2010](#), it is against the law for employers to discriminate against a person because of their disability from recruitment through to progression. Though some neurodiverse people will not identify themselves as disabled, they are likely to meet the legal definition and as such, they are afforded rights to workplace adjustments and protections against discrimination, harassment and victimisation.

If you need to put in place workplace adjustments to support neurodiverse employees, you may be eligible for funding from [Access to Work](#).

“I LOOK AT INTERVIEWING GUIDES AND I CAN’T HELP GET HUNG UP ON THE ‘STANDARDS’ OF PROFESSIONALISM.

DON’T FIDGET AS IT CAN BE DISTRACTING.

DON’T WEAR BRIGHT COLOURS.

RESPOND WITH ENTHUSIASM.

DON’T SPEAK TOO QUICKLY.

SMILE AND NOD.

MAINTAIN EYE CONTACT.

DO PEOPLE EVEN KNOW HOW HARD THESE THINGS ARE FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE? THE FACT THAT MAINTAINING EYE CONTACT CAN BE SO UNCOMFORTABLE IT HURTS, THAT FIDGETING IS VITAL FOR SELF-REGULATION AND PROCESSING INFORMATION”^{xxi}

Nesceda Blake, Autism Advocate

INSPIRE, HIRE & GROW TO SUPPORT NEURODIVERSITY

[Opening Doors](#) is Business in the Community's (BITC) inclusive recruitment campaign. Launched in February 2022, we have an ambition to make 2 million jobs more inclusive by 2025. The campaign seeks to help all disadvantaged and diverse jobseekers by calling on employers to take forward a minimum of three actions across five core principles.

Several of the actions that underpin the core principles have specific relevance to neurodiverse jobseekers, and these are pulled out below:

INSPIRE

Opening Doors Principle 1 calls on employers to create partnerships with organisations who can connect people from disadvantaged groups to your jobs. Looking beyond helping neurodiverse people into work, you should continue to work with partner organisations to help you to support neurodiverse employees in the workplace.

HIRE

Opening Doors Principle 2 asks businesses to show candidates that you are committed to inclusion. This includes:

- Ensuring that your job adverts reach excluded and diverse talent by advertising through a range of channels that target diverse groups.
- Making sure that your employees understand your commitment and provide training on inclusive recruitment to those involved in hiring.

Opening Doors Principle 3 requests that businesses make sure job descriptions and adverts are comprehensive and use inclusive language. Of relevance to neurodiverse jobseekers are the actions to:

- Remove jargon.

- Make it clear to applicants what the different stages of the application process will be and the associated timeframes.

Opening Doors Principle 4 invites employers to focus on the essential skills and capabilities that are needed to do the job by taking actions such as:

- Asking for skills rather than experience and qualifications where possible.
- Only asking for skills that are really needed, and at the level that the role requires.
- Reviewing the stages of the application and assessment processes to make sure that they are appropriate.

Opening Doors Principle 5 wants businesses to prioritise accessibility and eliminate bias by taking actions including:

- Asking about workplace adjustments at every step of the recruitment process.
- Providing information in accessible formats and different languages, as required.

GROW

- **Talk about neurodiversity;** the neurodiverse community is so varied, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to creating a more inclusive workplace. Listen to your neurodiverse employees about how they can be best supported through a person-centred approach and raise awareness by sharing knowledge at every level of your organisation.
- The office space may not be conducive to individuals who experience sensory overload. Consider whether you need to **make changes to the working environment**, such as creating quiet spaces, providing noise cancelling headphones and offering flexible working patterns.

- Ensure that documents are accessible, i.e., created in plain English, in accessible formats, and using an accessibility checker.

SPOTLIGHT ON: Marks & Spencer

Marks & Spencer is committed to doing the right thing to become a more inclusive employer. An important part of that commitment is supporting neurodiverse employees.

“We take a two-pronged approach to inclusive employment,” explains Heather Graham, Employment Programme Specialist. “The first is top down – we’ve reviewed and rewritten 23 HR policies and 16 line manager guides with neurodiversity in mind. We’ve also designed and delivered a diversity and inclusion questionnaire to all our preferred recruitment suppliers to ensure that their recruitment approach is aligned to ours, and signed up to job boards which specifically target diverse candidates”.

“But we know that not all neurodiverse employees are the same, and so our second prong is to take an individualised approach,” says Heather. “We encourage our line managers to keep checking in with their direct reports to make sure that we’re giving them the right support— this is really important because not everyone is confident at being forthcoming about their needs and people’s needs do change over time. We tailor the role to the individual as much as we can – that might mean offering shorter working days, scheduling shifts to coincide with quieter times in the store, or allocating tasks depending on the person’s strengths.”

“Supporting our neurodiverse employees is the right thing to do for Marks & Spencer and for our customers – we are keen to learn more and develop a better understanding of how we can support our neurodiverse colleagues so that we

can also offer a better service to our neurodiverse customers.”

MORE SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYERS

For help supporting neurodiverse jobseekers and employees:

- [Leonard Cheshire](#) supports disabled people, including people who are neurodiverse, to live, learn and work as independently as they choose, whatever their ability. They will work with employers to develop and deliver bespoke training and consultancy solutions that will help you to develop a best practice approach to disability and create impactful organisational change.
- [National Autistic Society](#) is the UK’s leading charity for autistic people and their families. They provide a variety of work programmes, training and resources to cater for autistic jobseekers and employers looking to benefit from hiring a more diverse workforce.
- [The Brain Charity](#) provides bespoke neurodiversity training for employers across the UK.

ENJOYED THIS CONTENT?

You might also like to:

- [find out more about inclusive recruitment](#)
- [learn more about our advisory services](#)
- [join us for one of our upcoming events](#)



Talk to one of our expert team [today](#) to learn how membership of BITC can help you take your responsible business journey further and drive lasting global change.

ENDNOTES

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