Divergent thinking

Embracing neurodiversity at work

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Contents

Foreword

IOSH is a charity with a simple vision – a safe and healthy world of work for everyone. Not just for those who fit a certain mould -such as physically able or neurotypical - but every single person of working age on this planet. As a safety and health professional and Chartered Fellow of IOSH, I've seen that diverse organisations that promote inclusion benefit from varied perspectives, fostering creativity and innovation. So, despite being neurotypical myself, it doesn't surprise me that research has consistently proven that businesses with inclusive environments – where all employees feel valued – have higher morale and productivity which ultimately creates safer and more effective workplaces.

My life changed on the 1 December 2000 when my amazing autistic daughter Katherine Holly was born. Over the years, I have grown to understand and love her autism and personality which makes her, her. This ongoing experience has made me a better person, reminding me every day just what potential may be unintentionally locked within the diversity that exists around us. It was therefore my privilege when as 2022/23 IOSH President, I was able to launch IOSH's *Divergent thinking* series which explored neurodiversity at work. The response to this series was tremendous; creating a platform for so many members and workers to share their lived experiences, ideas and passion for how we can continue to make the world of work more inclusive. I met and worked with some extraordinary people who further opened my eyes through their sharing and explanation of what it was like to be them, for which I am grateful.

For anyone to move forward, there needs to be a starting point to begin. This white paper brings together everything that we learnt during the *Divergent thinking* series and offers anyone who wants to create an inclusive working environment a starting point for greater understanding and clarity, whether neurotypical or neurodiverse. It is also a springboard for making the future richer and more collaborative with content that offers a range of insights to build upon.

It is essential that for us all to be at our best, we can be ourselves and bring our own unique individual set of traits, experiences, skills and personalities to the workplace and the wider world environments. Whether you are neurodiverse or not, I hope you will take forward the explanations, suggestions and examples within this paper to broaden or further widen your horizons for yourself or others. Truly together, we are so much better.

Lawrence Webb CFIOSH

IOSH Immediate Past President and Chief Safety Officer, Dstl Operations

Introduction

Estimates of the proportion of the global population that are neurodivergent vary, but commonly fall in the range from 15 to 20 per cent[1]. Too few of that so-called neurominority are in jobs where they feel able to disclose their neurodivergence and be supported by their employers.

Neurodivergent workers, such as dyslexic individuals or those on the autistic spectrum are protected by equality law in many countries. But just as organisations with mature safety and health management systems have evolved beyond simple legal compliance in physical protection of their workforces, so should they evolve in their support of neurodivergent employees.

Occupational safety and health professionals' remit has expanded over recent years to embrace mental health and wellbeing. Fostering a positive mental state and minimising undue stress for neurodivergent employees is an important part of that remit. IOSH is fully committed to supporting its members in helping their organisations to think differently about neurodiversity and embrace the differences between and talents of everyone in the workforce.

In this paper, which draws on a series of expert webinars broadcast by IOSH in 2023, we look at the value of providing a supportive environment in which not only can neurodivergent employees thrive but in which all employees can be their happiest and most productive. This is an environment which ensures not just equality, in which everyone has the same resources and opportunities, but equity in which each individual's different circumstances and needs are recognised and the exact resources and opportunities allocated to help reach an equal outcome. We also include a selection of IOSH members' views on how their neurodivergence has affected their working lives.

1 in 5 people worldwide are neurodiverse

Neurodivergent workers are protected by equality law in many countries

What is neurodiversity?

The term neurodiversity was coined by the Australian sociologist Judy Singer in 1998[2]. It has become an umbrella word for the multiplicity of different ways the human brain can function. The term's scope now embraces neurodevelopmental conditions including, but not limited to, those listed in the panel. Neurodivergent individuals have often been defined by their differences from so-called neurotypical people, whose ways of processing and retaining information and responding to stimuli are within a range that fits current societal norms.

The social model of disability was developed in the 1980s by disability activists as an alternative to the old medical model which saw neurodivergent people as "sufferers" whose conditions made them objects of pity. The social model views people as disabled by an uninclusive world rather than by their conditions. The social approach seeks solutions wherever feasible rather than emphasising problems, and sees the broadest answer being to change the culture, rather than just to make ad hoc local changes to the status quo. The model is important because it emphasises the fundamental lack of difference between neurodivergent and neurotypical people and helps banish old misconceptions about neurodiverse conditions rendering people with them less able. On the contrary, there is an increasing recognition of the strengths that some neurodivergent people have over their neurotypical peers, including the ability to bring different perspectives, to demonstrate acute focus on individual tasks and to see patterns in information that others struggle to find.

Contributors

IOSH would like to thank the following contributors to the webinar series on which this paper is based:

- Sharon Booth, Head of HR Operations, Worcestershire County Council
- Tony Bough, Head of Health Safety and Wellbeing, RSA Assurance
- Dr James Brown, Co-founder, ADHDadultuk
- Emma Case, Founder, Women Beyond the Box
- Emily Castle, Safety, Health and Environment Performance Improvement Manager, Costain Group
- Mark Charlesworth, Founder and Consultant, Neuro Tide
- Dr Nancy Doyle, Founder and Chief Research Officer, Genius at Work
- Fayola Francis, former Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Lead, IOSH
- Adam Gawne, Health, Safety and Environment Adviser, Gentoo Group
- Stuart Hughes, Head of Health and Safety, Mercedes-AMG Petronas F1 Team and IOSH President
- Gary Monaghan, Head of Occupational Safety and Health, Worcestershire County Council
- Lawrence Webb, Chief Safety Officer, DSTL, Immediate Past President, IOSH

Neurodiversity at work

The implication of the estimates that at least 15 per cent of any country's population is part of a neurominority is that at least one in seven of most organisations' workforces may be neurodivergent to some degree. These employees will not stop being neurodivergent in organisations which do not support them. But the lack of support may be a source of discrimination against these workers. For occupational safety and health practitioners particularly, this substantial minority of neurodivergent employees has important implications as up to one in five employees could be failing to receive or engage fully with important messages about protective controls in the workplace.

For organisations seeking to harness the productivity and creativity of all their employees there is also an implication for productivity if neurodivergent employees feel pressured to spend energy and effort on trying to conceal their neurodivergence.

There is little evidence that the proportion of neurodivergent people in the population has changed in recent decades. However, several developments have combined to push neurodiversity up the UK employment agenda.

Raised awareness in the health and education systems and among parents has increased the number of children and young people being diagnosed as neurodivergent, where once they might have been mistakenly classed as difficult or less intelligent than their peers. This is particularly true of conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD), where understanding was minimal in the past. Since those born since the 1980s now make up a majority of the workforce by most estimates, there are more people in employment diagnosed as neurodivergent.

In the UK, the Equality Act 2010, which combined all the previous pieces of anti-discrimination legislation into a single statute, helped focus organisations on their duty to make reasonable adjustments to accommodate any employee with one or more protected characteristics, and not to treat them less favourably than other employees.

There is also a growing discussion about the value of nurturing all employees as part of socially sustainable organisations. Investment fund managers have started asking the larger organisations whose stock they hold for details of their human capital management policies including diversity arrangements. Their rationale is not just the ethical priorities of some major institutional investors but that inclusivity helps businesses offer more reliable performance to customers and investors and makes them resilient to the external challenges that seem to occur with greater frequency.

Every neurodivergent individual is different. Generalised descriptions of the kinds of challenges someone with a condition such as ADHD or Dyslexia may face are just that: generalised. Adjustments to work arrangements based on these generalisations are likely to be inappropriate or insufficient.

Dr Nancy Doyle, founder of Genius Within, a consultancy that works with neurodivergent people and with employers, warns that attempts at neuroinclusivity in organisations must not be limited to employing neurodivergent employees as a separate group and treating them as special cases.

"Neuroinclusion is much more a cultural change, and a fundamental revisiting of HR conventions across the whole employee lifecycle,"
Dr Nancy Doyle

Emma Case, founder of the company Women Beyond the Box, which advises businesses on neurodiversity, says that it is not merely important for employers to understand neurodiversity, but critical.

"If we view neurodiversity in the same way we view gender – for example, if we asked how important it is for companies to learn about women – it would sound ridiculous."
Emma Case

Common forms of neurodiversity

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

People with ADHD may find it difficult to channel their attention (inattention), making it hard to maintain focus on a single task. Alternatively, they may have an excess of internal energy (hyperactivity), which causes them to be restless and to act on impulse. Some people experience both inattention and hyperactivity, known as combined ADHD.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

People on the autistic spectrum may have difficulty interpreting verbal and non-verbal language including gestures or tone of voice. They may experience over-sensitivity or under-sensitivity to sensual stimuli including sound, touch, light and colour. They may be most comfortable with established routines and sensitive to disruptions.

Dyslexia

Individuals with dyslexia may find it difficult to read text, to write and to spell words correctly.

Dyscalculia

People with dyscalculia may find it hard to understand numbers or perform mathematical calculations.

Dyspraxia

People with dyspraxia may find it difficult to perform coordinated movements, including driving vehicles or writing by hand.

Dysgraphia

People with dysgraphia experience difficulty when writing by hand.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

People with OCD experience frequent intrusive and unwelcome obsessional thoughts and may feel the need to carry out repetitive behaviours or rituals to prevent perceived harm and/or fears that stem from the thoughts.

Tourette's syndrome

People with Tourette's syndrome may display physical and verbal tics, involuntarily repeating a movement, word or phrase.

Disclosing neurodivergence

Individuals are under no obligation to tell their employers that they are neurodivergent. Survey questions posted by IOSH on LinkedIn and Instagram in October 2023 found that half of respondents who said they were neurodivergent would not disclose their status on a job application, and one in five was unsure whether they would do so. Among the minority of a separate sample who had told their current employer about their neurodivergence, few said the disclosure had been a negative experience.

If you are neurodivergent, would you declare it on a job application?

- **Yes: 28%**
- **No: 50%**
- **I'm not sure: 22%**

If you are neurodivergent, have you told your current employer?

- **Yes – it went well: 26%**
- **Yes – it didn't go well: 4%**
- **I'm considering it: 15%**
- **No: 55%**

If employees do choose to disclose a condition, the timing is entirely up to them. But the onus is on employers to foster a culture in which people feel happy to disclose because they know they will be supported. Adam Gawne, Health, Safety and Environment Adviser at housing association Gentoo Group, says employees "should have the opportunity throughout [their employment] in one-to-ones to open up and say 'I am struggling', and start the conversation."

Emily Castle, Safety, Health and Environment Performance Improvement Manager at construction company Costain, says the company has made a simple change in all its references to neurodiversity in forms and policies, substituting the word "disclose" with "share", to remove any possible stigma. "Just changing some simple language can make it seem so much better," she says. Reviewing the language used in policies and employee communications to see whether it is exclusive or positively inclusive is part of the process of making an organisation more supportive of neurodivergent employees.

Under the UK's Equality Act 2010, neurodivergent employees do not need to have a formally diagnosed condition to request reasonable adjustments. Employers cannot say they will do nothing until an employee has an official diagnosis; they risk discrimination and unnecessary discomfort or distress for the individual making the request. Dr Nancy Doyle notes that the number of Employment Tribunal cases involving claims of discrimination against neurodivergent people has risen 30 per cent in three years. In her view, if any employee is struggling with tasks or working conditions, the organisation should make any reasonable adjustments to help them, and all requests should be taken at face value. In other words, an employee's request for support is enough reason to make a reasonable adjustment without them having to provide proof of need.

Where an individual is seeking a diagnosis, they may face a lengthy wait of up to several years for formal assessment and diagnosis through the UK public health system. Employers should consider whether to fund or part-fund private assessments, where the individual believes they will benefit from a diagnosis.

Building an inclusive organisation in which diversity – including neurodiversity – is accommodated and recognised for the value it can add, is dependent on some fundamental building blocks. This includes leadership commitment through training for specialists, and middle managers through to a new approach to designing systems that benefit everyone within it. We will cover these elements in the following sections.

Members' stories

Emma Burdett, Building Safety Manager

I am diagnosed autistic. In a nutshell, I am smart and organised, but struggle with social and emotional skills. My autism means I have a great eye for detail and generally don't get easily flustered. One of my previous roles was in emergency planning and my manager liked working with me as I always seemed so calm, it was more a case of I can emotionally remove myself from a situation and concentrate on the facts and solutions.

My job is very interactive with our residents, I attend a lot of resident events to provide fire safety information and answer questions, but find my social anxiety prevents me from attending work social events. This is "work Emma". This version of me can talk to residents and colleagues about fire safety because I am competent in my field, I am confident in what I am speaking about. Outside work, I have specialist interests, routines that I repeat and rarely socialise. I have meltdowns, particularly if I have had a particularly bad day, but no one at work is aware, because it is not part of "work Emma".

Being autistic in the work setting is still very hard. I wear an Autistic badge, but still mask a lot. I still feel that in general, because I am not what people view as "typically" autistic and I have learned to conform to what is perceived as normal, when I say I am autistic people normally reply "But you don't seem autistic", or ignore it altogether. I would rather people asked me questions about it to understand me better.

My employer is very supportive. They have basically said they will help in any way they can. It helps that they are a very open and diverse organisation.

Neurodiversity in the workplace still needs development and acceptance, but we have certainly come a lot further than when I first started working over 20 years ago.

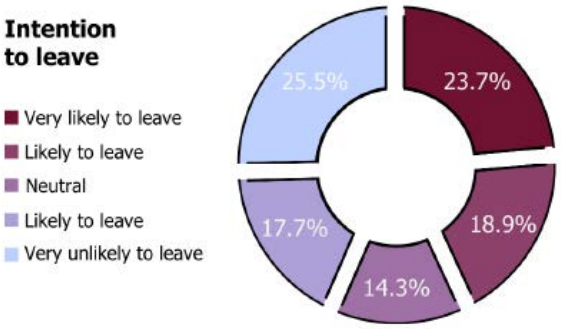
Securing leaders' support

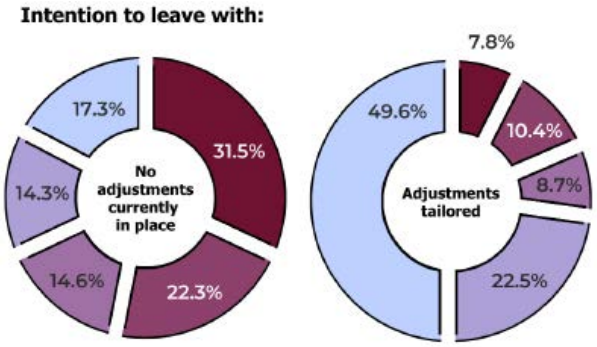
The foundation of any organisation's efforts to attract and support neurodivergent people is the conviction of senior management that embracing neurodiversity should be a priority. Without a senior sponsor, projects are likely to be underfunded and eclipsed by other targets and initiatives.

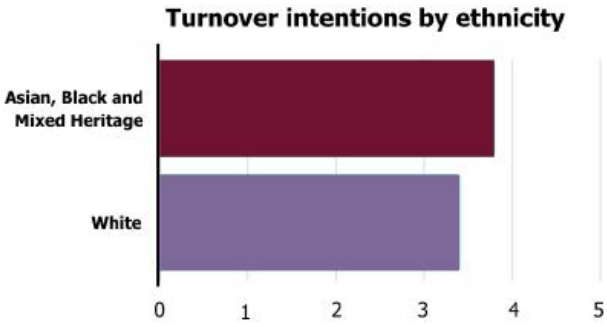
"The first thing that can go wrong is that you don't get top level support," says Dr James Brown, co-founder of the charity ADHDadultUK "You don't get the visible C-suite message: "This is what we are doing and this is why we are doing it'. Without that, it is very difficult to get buy-in from people who only respond to authority figures telling them what to do."

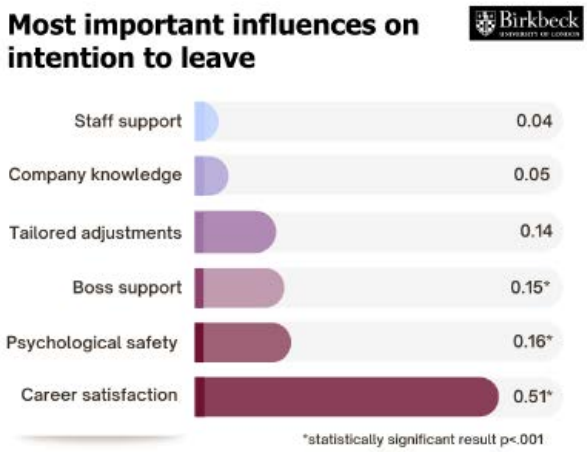
Evidence about the value of diversity management in retaining talent is one possible lever in securing leaders' engagement. Research by software platform Cloverpop, evaluating the impact of 600 business decisions made by 200 teams in a variety of companies, found that diverse teams frequently made better decisions than non-diverse ones[3].

Dr Doyle, who helped to set up the UK's first research centre dedicated to neurodiversity at work, in collaboration with Birkbeck College, University of London, co-authored a paper titled *Neurodiversity at Work 2023, Demand, Supply and a Gap Analysis*[4]. The research found that among 990 neurodivergent employees interviewed, the most important influences on whether they intended to leave their current employer were their career satisfaction and their level of perceived psychological safety.









Figures from *Neurodiversity at Work 2023, Demand, Supply and a Gap Analysis.* Reproduced with kind permission of Dr Nancy Doyle.

Culture change

Building a positive organisational culture in which diverse employees thrive and are encouraged to share details of their needs goes well beyond just having policies and training and making individual adjustments wherever feasible, although those are all important building blocks, The organisation must also think of ways to show to all employees its commitment.

A neurodiversity section in a corporate diversity and inclusion policy is essential, clearly stating the organisation's aim to attract, nurture and support neurodivergent employees and how that translates into practice. It is also important to review all other policies, from recruitment to safety and health, to see if they are compatible with the company's intended approach and that they refer to the neurodiversity policy where appropriate.

Part of creating a supportive, inclusive ethos is to encourage leaders with any personal experience of neurodiversity to speak about it openly and publicly. Another is to support neurodivergent employees in forming groups or networks – both formally and informally – to discuss issues important to them and offer mutual support. These employee resource groups can be important sounding boards to supplement surveys and individual feedback in researching ways to create inclusivity by design (see below).

Dr Brown says these groups should be enabled and encouraged by organisations, with space to meet, dedicated communications channels, time away from normal duties, and other support and resources. He argues that if an organisation really wants to improve awareness and knowledge of neurodiversity throughout the workforce, organising an annual Neurodiversity Awareness Week, is a good move. "You would have invited speakers giving talks. If it's virtual you would have [Microsoft] Teams meetings for people to ask questions about neurodiversity," he says. "There might be a stand in a [staff] café. It creates this culture where people are aware these things are there."

Behind the mask

Fear of stigmatism or experience of adverse treatment can lead neurodivergent individuals to make efforts to conceal their differences. They may see this "masking" as necessary to fit in or to advance at work. But masking often comes at a personal cost to their health and wellbeing. At the very least it means that they are not able to be comfortable or relaxed at work, so will likely not be at their most creative and productive. More importantly, especially in people with ASD, it can result in high stress levels and mental exhaustion from the effort of trying to modify or conceal behaviour[5]. It may also lead to emotional dysregulation, where suppression of responses at work leads to emotions overflowing at other times. Neurodivergent individuals may also judge themselves unnecessarily harshly when they fail to mask neurodivergent behaviour, causing further stress.

While it is up to each neurodivergent person to choose whether and how far they show or conceal their condition, employers should aim to create work environments where there is no necessity or incentive to mask behaviour because everyone is valued and supported.

"You would have invited speakers giving talks. If it's virtual you would have Teams meetings for people to ask questions about neurodiversity," he says. "There might be a stand in a café. It creates this culture where people are aware these things are there."
Dr James Brown

Members' stories

Darren Teverson
QHSE Professional

In 2011, whilst struggling with the NEBOSH Diploma written exams, I watched a BBC documentary in which actress Kara Tointon discussed her challenges and coping mechanisms she has implemented since being diagnosed dyslexic. I watched this documentary and said to myself (very excitedly) "that's me" and that felt like a moment of self-discovery which resulted in me contacting Dyslexia Action and arranging an assessment. The report did indeed confirm that my challenges were mainly due to dyslexia and I struggled mainly with reading and writing.

In my career so far I have been fortunate to secure some very strong positions with globally renowned companies. I have built an incredible amount of experience working in health and safety management in the last 17 years and I am finally about to complete my NEBOSH Diploma Unit DNI assignment after passing the three written exams during 2021 and 2022 – only once I had disclosed I was dyslexic as I was then offered extra time for reading and writing. I still struggle, and my coping mechanisms are a crucial part of the way I work. I may not work in the same way as someone classed as neurotypical but I know that the way I see things, especially in the health and safety world, tends to set me aside from others because I am able to develop and implement risk management controls much easier.

My current role which I have held for the last five years is in a global supply chain risk management company, Avetta, where I have enjoyed fine-tuning my auditing skills through pre-qualification audits, watching contractors build and maintain a robust health and safety management framework as they go through the assessments. My employer cannot be more supportive in allowing me to work in my own way although it was quite daunting when I decided to discuss my diagnosis but I am really glad I did. I had been very hesitant to disclose in previous roles however with Avetta, I felt a greater acceptance of all areas of equal opportunities. I encourage other OSH professionals to do the same if you haven't already. There is a stigma around disclosing neurodiversity but it is one that should be broken.

Training managers

Managers' understanding and commitment are essential to successfully embracing diversity, but many are never even trained in basic management and leadership techniques. Best practice, says Dr Brown, is to introduce compulsory disability awareness training for all managers, including information on supporting neurodivergent employees and to make it subject to periodic online refresher sessions. Training should help managers to recognise and control unconscious bias and assumptions about individual capability or behaviour. As well as off-the-shelf training materials, training should include references to the lived experiences of neurodivergent workers.

Managers should be encouraged to ask open questions about wellbeing and how all individuals are coping. The aim is to develop a general alertness and sensitivity to signs that someone is struggling. This alertness will allow early intervention and support, whether a team member needs it because of their neurodiversity or because they are trying to cope with a stress or mental health issue.

If they notice that a team member seems to find particular circumstances or tasks challenging, rather than leaping to conclusions managers should ask privately if there is anything they would like to discuss or would like help with.

The emphasis on catering for individual needs naturally includes avoiding stereotypes in any organisational or team-level communication about neurodiversity. Negative stereotypes, suggesting that neurodivergent people are in any way less able, must be avoided. Employees using negative epithets, must be discouraged, as with any other form of discriminatory language. But it is also important not to promote stereotyping – however well-intended – that highlights potential special aptitudes of neurodivergent people. These can create unrealistic expectations of individuals and add to the stress they may experience as a result of managing their condition at work.

In planning to create more inclusive work environments, patterns, and cultures, embracing the needs of groups who may have been historically under-represented must be a meaningful process. People inevitably possess many characteristics and this intersectionality creates its own unique set of experiences and requirements. Neurodivergent conditions are much less commonly diagnosed in some sections of the population, such as ethnic minority groups, than others. It is best to think of these experiences and needs as layers of individuality. The combination of intersectionality and the diversity of characteristics makes it all the more important that any individual adjustments are based on discussions about needs and preferences with each person.

Managers and neurodivergent employees should work together in building an open and trusting relationship.

Making adjustments

Reasonable adjustments for neurodivergent employees are not just required by law, they are an opportunity for the employer to maximise the employee's potential at work. As we have noted in the section on disclosure, employees do not have to possess a diagnosis to request an adjustment, and an employer who refuses to make a reasonable adjustment may face legal action.

Most adjustments are very low cost, a tiny fraction of the cost of employing someone. However, reasonable adjustments are not always made. "Employers often do the bare legal minimum," says Dr Brown. "If employees declare they are neurodivergent, they have an occupational health assessment, then a work activity plan." In too many cases, though, the follow-up on the plan is slow or minimal. Adjustments may be delayed for inadequate reasons such as software being hard to procure "There is often a big gap between the assessment and reasonable adjustments being put in place."

Employers may allow flexibility about work location, such as working from home for tasks needing concentration or about working times, varying start and finish times or breaks. Often, they will involve very small changes, such as moving someone's desk to face away from the window, accepting they may not always want to have their camera on during remote meetings, providing a "do not disturb" sign/function on their workspace, telephone and email when they need to focus on a task. In some cases, neurodivergent employees may need extra equipment, such as text-to-voice or voice-to-text software, noise cancelling headphones, or desk partitions in open-plan offices.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to give an extensive list of adjustments for different forms of neurodiversity. But prescriptive lists are also unnecessary as the adjustments appropriate to each employee will be arrived at in discussion with the individual. "If you've met one neurodivergent person, then you've met one neurodivergent person," says Tony Bough, Head of Health Safety and Wellbeing at RSA Assurance. "Where we often go wrong with reasonable adjustments is we don't ask the person, we dive into research."

When an individual discloses the details of their requirements, the organisation should check whether they are comfortable about that information and any adjustments made being explained to their colleagues. The individual should be treated as the owner of their personal information and, even when making adjustments involves different functions in the organisation, the individual should be consulted about this.

Once adjustments are made, they also need to be maintained, warns Dr Brown, particularly if they rely on other colleagues to modify their behaviour. "Often all these things are put in place and then, after a few months, the old behaviours return," he says. "Walking past the do-not-disturb sign saying 'can I just give you these letters?' That do-not-disturb sign has to be sacrosanct because, particularly if you have ADHD, it's about allocating attention and switching attention, re-engaging after a distraction is really difficult."

"Where we often go wrong with reasonable adjustments is we don't ask the person, we dive into research."
Tony Bough

Inclusive by design

Well-meaning organisations often try to retrofit adjustments for neurodivergent individuals on a case-by-case basis, offering extra equipment or adjusting work patterns as the individual need becomes obvious. But this ad hoc approach can leave employees feeling unsupported and as though they need to mask their conditions.

An overarching plan to support all employees more inclusively presents an opportunity to review and refresh whole systems. Often, the way that workplaces or working arrangements are configured has not changed in decades and it may be unclear who they were designed for originally. The explanation that things are done a certain way because they have "always been done that way" should be treated as a flag that they are in need of review.

Designing systems that centre on neurodivergent people's needs is likely to ensure they cater to a range of workers more generally. Taking the working environment as an example, configuring offices with a range of work settings, from communal areas to quiet spaces and private booths, will not just benefit those whose conditions make noisy open-plan desk areas hard to concentrate in. All the occupants will benefit from the choice of settings to best match their needs, preferences, and different tasks.

Communication of important information provides another useful example. Extensive meeting minutes make it hard for some people to identify the important action points. Putting these into a separate, brief list with actions assigned to named individuals might save time and clarify tasks for everybody. Similarly, in safety documentation, summarising the critical points in an otherwise long method statement can make the safe procedure more easily digested by anyone reading it. Making important information available in other forms than text, such as videos or audio files, also improves communication.

Dr Brown also suggests that ensuring there are gaps between consecutive meetings, so that people do not become overwhelmed by information and can regroup, benefits all participants. Ensuring that all meetings have a clearly stated aim and an agenda distributed in advance, reduces potential anxiety.

Designing for diversity should start with the recruitment process, which should cater for the widest group of candidates. Examples include reviewing job descriptions to check they are sufficiently clear and detailed for potential applications, providing interview questions to candidates in advance, or making sure that any tests can be completed in ways that do not disadvantage neurodivergent applicants. Alternatives to conventional job interviews could be considered where candidates are disadvantaged by the practice of sitting on opposite sides of a desk. Breaks might also be offered during an interview where it would benefit an applicant.

Dr Doyle even questions the need for interviews as a must-have part of the recruitment process. "If I'm hiring someone for my finance team, I don't interview them, because that's not the job I need them to do," she says. "I'll give them a spreadsheet of management accounts that's got some weird holes in it and see if they can make sense of it. And then if they give me that feedback on a call, in an email, in a report, in an interview, I don't mind because the structure of how they communicate is irrelevant to the task, I want them really good at analysing data, not necessarily smiling and making eye contact."

Creative thinking about how systems could be made more accommodating to everyone should extend to all elements of the employment relationship, including job descriptions, induction programmes, probation periods, and performance reviews.

Dr Doyle has co-authored a paper Diamond in the rough? An "empty review" of research into "neurodiversity" and a road map for developing the inclusion agenda, which contains a table suggesting the ways systems can be designed for optimum inclusion[6].

"If I'm hiring someone for my finance team, I don't interview them, because that's not the job I need them to do. I'll give them a spreadsheet of management accounts that's got some weird holes in it and see if they can make sense of it."
Dr Nancy Doyle

Members' stories

Anonymous safety practitioner

I've worked in safety for twelve years, and probably being from a non hands-on-the-tools background has been harder to overcome than how my brain is wired.

For me, it's dyspraxia with a side order of ADHD – getting that understanding meant I no longer beat myself up for being different, I'm "normal" for someone with these attributes. The impact of understanding yourself is huge, and for me, labels help. You don't play "guess the contents" when it comes to tinned food. Labels are great for signposting potential – don't let them limit you.

The benefits come when I'm doing stuff which uses my best ND [neurodivergent] attributes; focus, detail, pattern spotting, problem solving, making stuff clear – but they aren't superpowers as when they go into overdrive, it's really harmful in terms of hyperfocus and over-commitment. The downside is that I forget not everyone is wired like me and not everyone wants ALL the detail or is as enthused about something as I am – and that leads to frustrations. Telling people I'm neurodivergent isn't a problem as long as it's relevant. I'd rather let my skills speak for themselves – rather than being known as "that ND one". Having a neurodiversity is part of me, not all of me. Not many companies are mature enough yet to understand this. I'm not the "ND expert", just an expert on me! Neurotypical people need to take responsibility for educating themselves around ND; awareness is great, actual action is better. What do I need to be the best me? Simply, be clear in what you want. Give all the joining info for a meeting, setting out a plan for an event, ability to have a break from noise at large events. Be aware that if I'm asking lots of questions, it's because I want to understand you. And if it's a rhetorical question, you may need to make that clear! Physical environments are the biggest challenge for me, as too much light, sound, highly-reflective surfaces lead to sensory overload and panic. But I just accept getting lost in big buildings – and walking into things.

One of the best things someone who knew I was ND did, was to ask "do you have a preference for where you sit at the event" – and this was the first time that anyone had acted on information they'd had previously. Small thing, huge impact. And I've got braver in saying "This is what I need; that can be done".

Case study: Support in practice at Worcestershire County Council

"I have never felt more confident and competent, not just as a manager and a health and safety practitioner but as an individual, because of the conditions here and how fantastic Sharon is and the whole organisation is," says Gary Monaghan.

Gary is Head of Occupational Safety and Health at Worcestershire County Council in the West Midlands. Sharon is his manager Sharon Booth, Head of HR Operations at the authority.

Gary, now aged 52, manages autism, ADHD, dyslexia and dyspraxia, all of which were diagnosed in his 30s and late 40s. Gary says he has had good and bad experiences interviewing for jobs and was unsure about whether to disclose his neurodivergence before his interview in 2021 with Sharon and the council's Associate HR Director. "Literally within a minute I felt so overwhelmed by their informality and friendliness I disclosed everything, and I'm really pleased I did," he says.

Armed with this knowledge, Sharon says that once he was appointed, the organisation set about providing him with the support he needed. These included speech-recognition software, help with proofreading written reports and the option to work remotely when a noisy office environment might prove too challenging. But Sharon says that supporting him involved making time to understand Gary's experience and expectations and giving him confidence that he was psychologically safe: "How do we create a safe place where Gary feels completely at ease to tell me everything I need to know to ensure that as his manager, as a leader at the council, I can create an environment to bring the best out in Gary?"

Shortly before Gary joined the authority, Worcestershire County Council had introduced a "workplace adjustment passport" for any employee who wanted one. The passport is a record of any adjustments needed and made, for disability or health reasons, updated when circumstances change. The passport is owned by the individual and can be released to council staff who might need to help with adjustments only with the holder's permission and strictly on a need-to-know basis.

"You tell us what challenges and barriers you have and what you need and as an employer we listen and see what we can put in place," says Sharon. She says the passport helps create a positive culture in which people feel recognised and supported.

Her advice to anyone trying to support people who would benefit from adjustments to make them more productive is to ask them what they need. "I might know textbook theories about neurodiversity and some conditions but I don't know how that impacts Gary and I haven't got a lived experience of those, so I need to park any preconceived ideas." She recommends setting a little time at the start of one-to-one meetings to talk about anything that needs adjusting. "It doesn't feel like you are spending a huge amount of time on it," she says. "The most important thing is creating an environment of trust and safety so you can have those honest conversations."

"I've never been in an organisation where people focus on what goes right," says Gary.

He adds that it's a lesson for safety and health practitioners too: "Let's start looking at when things go right."

Conclusion

Most of those who contributed their expertise to the IOSH webinar series on which this paper is based made the same point that is made in the best practice literature about embracing neurodiversity at work and supporting neurodivergent employees. As with the duty of care to maintain employee safety and health, there is no point at which that support is "done". Securing senior management support, developing policies and implementing them, training managers, designing work systems and spaces to best suit the needs of all employees and making reasonable adjustments wherever they are requested, is just the start of a process. The measure of an organisation's commitment to diversity is how it serves each new applicant and recruit and how it adapts to employees' changing needs.

"It's an ongoing thing, supporting somebody," says Dr James Brown. "For a lot of employers it's a case of doing the bare minimum: we've assessed you, we'll talk about reasonable adjustments, then we'll leave you to get on with your job."

The organisations that define themselves by opposition to that compliance-only approach are likely to be the ones that reap rewards in terms of productivity, loyalty and resilience in a world in which access to the best talent is the differentiator between successful and failing organisations.

1 www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7732033/
2 salvesen-research.ed.ac.uk/resources-and-outreach/library-of-book-reviews/book-review-book-neurodiversity-birth-of-an-idea
3 www.cloverpop.com/blog/infographic-diversity-inclusion-better-decision-making-at-work
4 eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/50834/22/50834c.pdf
5 www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/aut.2020.0083
6 eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/43682/7/43682a.pdf

Resources

IOSH neurodiversity webinar series (https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PL0kuRSI454qJlirURz-b2lf3_5UNfvxWE&si=Xfjb8LDiFJLSfiOH) – Experts, mostly neurodivergent individuals discuss the nature of neurodiversity and how organisations should support neurodivergent employees.

Access to work (www.gov.uk/access-to-work) – UK Government agency that offers help to individuals with disabilities or health conditions and may fund assessment of needs and some adjustments.

Business disability forum (businessdisabilityforum.org.uk) – Business membership forum aiming to break down barriers to inclusion, has free guidance in its knowledge hub.

Centre for Neurodiversity at Work (www.bbk.ac.uk/research/centres/neurodiversity-at-work) – University of London research centre with free papers and resources.

About IOSH

We are the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH), the Chartered body for health and safety professionals. Founded in 1945, we are a charity with a simple vision – a safe and healthy world of work for everyone. With more than 50,000 members in over 130 countries, we're the world's largest professional health and safety organisation.

Our training and consultancy solutions help businesses solve real health and safety problems in the workplace using practical and effective tools, processes and knowledge.

Working with global bodies such as the UN and the Commonwealth, we provide expert analysis on safety and health and raise awareness of OSH issues at a global level.

IOSH
The Grange
Highfield Drive
Wigston
Leicestershire
LE18 1NN
UK

+44 (0)116 350 0700
iosh.com

twitter.com/IOSH_tweets
facebook.com/IOSHofficial
linkedin.com/company/iosh
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instagram.com/ioshofficial
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