



NEUROdiversification Guidebook

Applying the Principles of NEUROdiversification in the Workplace





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Preface

Over the last quarter century the concept of Neurodiversity has gained widespread acceptance as a valuable tool for understanding differences in human thinking, personality and interaction. Building on this, Neurodiversification seeks to apply the insights provided by Neurodiversity to real-world situations - enriching workplaces, classrooms, clubs, communities and institutions with often-marginalised perspectives and cultural depth. In the following discussion we explore what Neurodiversification has to offer, obstacles to implementation, and some approaches to kick-start the Neurodiversification of your workplace.

Table of Contents

Neurodiversity and Neurodivergent People	1
What is Neurodiversity?	1
Neurotypical and Neurodivergent	1
Human 'spikey profiles'	1
What does it mean to be Neurodivergent?	1
Social disadvantage	2
In summary	2
Neurodivergent People in the Workplace	3
Opportunities	3
Assumptions	3
Risks and Constraints	3
Recruitment	4
Recruitment agencies	4
Interviews	4
Signalling sincerity	4
Trust	5
Your Neurodivergent Employees	6
You already have Neurodivergent staff	6
Masking	6
Prevention is better...	6
Listening and attitudes	7
Our 'new' normal	7
Your in-house experts	7
Designing policies and processes	8
Simple examples	9
What next?	9
Is Your Workplace Neurodivergent-inclusive?	10
A Sample List of Neurodivergent Types	11

Neurodiversity and Neurodivergent People

What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is a concept that arose in the mid-1990s online Autistic community as a combination of 'neuro-', meaning 'relating to the nervous system' and 'diversity.' The term is analogous to biodiversity: that human neurology varies across society, which itself is like an ecosystem. Societies do better with a balance of skills, perspectives and attributes, avoiding groupthink, skill gaps, and stagnation. This applies in the workplace for similar reasons.

The definition includes the whole human nervous system – not just the brain, but spinal, sensory, autonomic and motor systems. Variations may be noted in touch, vision, balance, temperature regulation, coordination, speech etc., not just in reasoning, memory or processing.

Neurotypical and Neurodivergent

Most people fit into the large subcategory Neurotypical – broadly similar in how they sense, emote, think, and respond. That's probably about 80-90% of humans.

The other 10-20% are Neurodivergent, diverging from the majority neurological profile in one or more significant ways. Being an umbrella term, it is a diverse mix, from Autistic to Dyslexic, Giftedness to ADHD, Sensory Acuity to Dyspraxic, and many more. Many Neurodivergent people align with two or more of these labels. The stereotypes linked to those labels can lock individuals into simplistic boxes, and treat them as society's 'broken toys' rather than examples of essential diversity.

Human 'spikey profiles'

It makes no sense to simplify humans to a single part of themselves. It is unreasonable to assume someone cannot study economics because they have mobility limitations, or manage staff because they are technically proficient. If anything, we expect the opposite – a 'spikey profile' of skills and attributes, focus on their capabilities, and help them bypass their limitations.

What does it mean to be Neurodivergent?

We all have a mix attributes that shape how we experience, understand and navigate life. A marked visual, hearing, cognitive or mobility difference - positive or negative - clearly is going to play into how you experience, interpret and respond to your environment. This applies also to less evident traits, such as process-oriented thinking, spatial awareness, high empathy or fine motor skills. They may be largely invisible but are constantly shaping the person, their worldview and actions.

There's a positive feedback loop here – how you view situations shapes how you respond to them, which shapes the outcomes, shaping how you view the world... and it also shapes how others view you and you view them, creating friendships, opposition, and collaborations.

Social disadvantage

It is no surprise that this often leads like-minded people to group together – we appreciate those who view the world as we do, and act as we would. Neurodivergent people tend to lose out in this process. Many types of neurodivergence arise in less than 2% of the population, and are often associated, for unfortunate historical reasons, with negative ideas – disorder, deficit, limitation, inability, excessive, lacking, erratic, obsessive, incapable... When people are seen negatively or worldviews don't align, individuals get excluded. This is a common experience for marginalised communities, with measureable harmful impacts, as described by the Minority Stress model.

Exclusion is often a snap judgement, an on-the-fly risk assessment taken within the context of social dynamics, taken within a second of first contact. It has nothing to do with what the excluded person has to offer. For the excluded person, there is the psychological impact of exclusion itself, but also loss of both social connections and collaborative experiences, which double-down on their disadvantages and minimise the opportunities to develop their capabilities.

A significant percentage of Neurodivergent people struggle to access appropriate employment (over 80% of Autistic people are unemployed or underemployed). Neurodivergent people typically need to perform significantly better than their peers to be even 'allowed in the room.' The experience fosters more stress and drains energy needed to over-perform in the first place.

This in turn can impact employability and generates poverty, social isolation, poor mental and physical health outcomes, and shockingly low life expectancy. In almost all cases, none of these outcomes arise as a result of being Neurodivergent, but as consequences of being shut out of opportunities by others – often unconsciously.

In summary

For most, being Neurodivergent is to 'feel different,' because others view us as somehow different and shut us out. That can make daily life difficult, but it is not the whole story.

Marginalisation also fosters perspectives not composed of 'obvious' truths or groupthink. It also leads many Neurodivergent people to value honesty, integrity, commitment to excellence and loyalty, to apply these within their lives and to seek out those characteristics in others.

Neurodivergent People in the Workplace

Opportunities

Being Neurodivergent is not a problem, just a difference. Indeed, it can be a striking advantage. For instance, Dyslexic or ADHD people are more likely than most to excel in creative, hands-on, or crisis management work environments, while Autistic people often excel in tasks that require attention to fine detail, pattern recognition and probability assessment, but also in caring roles.

These characteristics have value in the workplace yet, though accurate statistics are nigh on impossible to secure, estimates point to 40-80% of Neurodivergent people being underemployed or unemployed. Policies to attract Neurodivergent staff can access a largely untapped resource pool for needed skills and outside-the-box perspectives, an approach we call Neurodiversification.

Assumptions

At this point it is necessary to add a note of caution. There is a risk of falling into the mind-set of assuming 'those people are good at X.' Really, this is just the flip-side of 'those people can't do X' and can create unnecessary barriers to employment or development, just one step up the ladder. Most roles do not require one-in-a-million geniuses, just people with certain skills who turn up and get the job done.

A few businesses latched onto the 'Autistics make good developers' idea but resisted going beyond that. Over several years the Autistic community, led by one of the authors, collected a database of actual roles Autistic people perform. It can be summarised as: Everything. From CFO to part-time retail, civil engineer to elderly care, lawyer to neurologist, marketing director to dancer to actuary. For a while we joked the only jobs missing were as submarine crew... until someone turned up.

Risks and Constraints

Neurodivergent people often are assumed to be risky: unemployable, 'difficult,' unreliable or associated with niche work types as above. The obstacle lies not in the people but in the constraints imposed on their access to employment, retention and development.

For much of the remainder of this document we will explore those obstacles to Neurodiversification, where they arise, and how we can bypass or eliminate them.

Recruitment

Many Neurodivergent people experience obstacles within the recruitment process itself. Research carried out by one of our staff in 2017 revealed that simply mentioning involvement in volunteer activities with Autistic people on a CV led to zero responses from 67 job applications, while leaving this out of identical applications for the same positions resulted in 11 responses and four interview offers. The signs of a striking bias, simply by association, are clear. This first-stage obstacle aligns well with anecdotal evidence from Neurodivergent people. Most refrain from even hinting at being Autistic, ADHD, Bipolar, Dyspraxic, etc at the point of application, simply to have a chance to get to interview.

Policies achieve nothing unless they are consistently implemented. This means ensuring HR staff are not just on board in principle with Neurodiversification, but appropriately trained, communicate this to recruitment agencies, and maintain sufficient ongoing oversight over their processes.

Recruitment agencies

Outsourcing to recruitment agencies has many advantages, but also limits oversight. Anecdotal evidence suggests that Neurodivergent applicants fare better when applying direct to businesses compared to applying via agencies, and that's a problem. It is not in the interests of agencies to take risks. This is a cultural issue a single document or training session can't address, but does emphasise how crucial it is to work closely with agencies and communicate your policies clearly.

Interviews

Interviews, regardless of format, may present further obstacles. Lack of clarity about the format or duration can lead to unnecessary anxiety and an applicant failing to perform at their best. Equally the environment can play a significant role, particularly for those susceptible to background sounds, lighting, temperature, etc. We have encountered instances of applicants adversely affected by light angling through a slatted window blind, buzzing from an overhead light, or being interviewed in a busy dining area, and unable to perform at their best.

Asking applicants what accommodations they require helps, but due to past experiences of workplace exclusion or discrimination, many opt to 'tough it out' rather than risk outing themselves up front to a potential employer. "Get in the door before disclosing anything" is a common advice.

Signalling sincerity

What does make a real difference is being alert to common issues that can arise during recruitment and ensuring that they are addressed beforehand. One simple example is the wording used in an inclusivity statement, which many Neurodivergent people will check out before even applying for a position. Including Neurodivergence alongside gender, ethnicity and so on is a great start. Ensuring it

is not tagged on the end of a list helps signal this is not tokenism, that the company is serious about inclusion, and that yes, it is safe to ask for accommodations.

Similarly, the way the question of personal accommodations or accessibility needs is approached can make a huge difference. An example that signals sincerity:

“We have an inclusive work environment and that ***works well for us***. To ***maintain and expand*** that diversity we are ***keen to ensure*** all applicants can perform at interview on ***as equal footing as possible***. If you have accessibility or environmental requirements or concerns, please let us know and ***we will do what we can*** to address them. Doing so will ***in no way impact*** on any assessment of your suitability for this role.”

The highlights we've added are big green lights. They are clear, positive and realistic.

Ensuring all information is clear and comprehensive aids communication, and is another positive signal your business cares about 'getting it right.' Advising the stages of your recruitment process; explaining how applicants will be notified; providing dates when stages of the process will occur; providing written and visual directions to your premises; advising in advance the location of accessible toilets and refreshments; ensuring reception staff are briefed on applicants needs... Steps that take minimal effort and strip away unnecessary uncertainty and anxiety.

During interview, confirming up front that the applicant's accessibility/environmental requirements have been met, offering them materials to make notes if they wish, and avoiding loosely worded or open questions help maintain the sense that you and your organisation can be trusted.

Trust

What do we mean by 'trusted'? If that was your response, you are not alone. However, it is what we've been discussing from the outset here. Neurodiversification requires the fostering of trust above all. Neurodivergent people generally will come to you having lived their lives trying to assess the risks each situation presents, and whether each person they encounter can be trusted. Sadly, our societies are constructed in ways that actively exclude, undermine and break promises to Neurodivergent people. Betrayal and discrimination are common experiences, so much so that every hint, each possible risk, can raise anxiety levels.

That's something of a quick look at the process of recruitment from a Neurodivergent perspective. Much more could be said – and done – on this topic. If you would like to dig deeper and implement approaches that will allow you access to this under-utilised resource pool, AUsome Training will be very happy to help you Neurodiversify, or point you to others in the Neurodivergent community better placed to speak to your specific situation.

Your Neurodivergent Employees

You already have Neurodivergent staff

Congratulations! If you have 20+ staff, it is almost certainly true. Most working Neurodivergent people do so by masking, also called camouflaging or passing. Neurodiversification means recognising and supporting them as much as attracting new employees.

Masking

This is sometimes misunderstood as akin to adopting a professional persona, using your Phone Voice, or being friendly to retail customers. It is not the same. In each of these cases, the individual has a clear sense of who they are, and makes a decision to adopt a way of interacting, which they can happily – and safely – drop as soon as that situation ends.

Masking is much more pervasive within the individual's life, founded on a real need to take on a permanent false persona to avoid ableist discrimination, being talked over, or being assumed incompetent. There are parallels to LGBTQIA+ community feeling safer passing as cis or straight.

Masking is energy-hungry and stressful. It can be hard to take off the mask when it has been a basic aspect of your life from childhood, is the persona colleagues and friends have come to know, and in particular to feel safe being your 'real self' in front of others.

One consequence can be – often in mid-career – the individual can no longer maintain the effort required, leading to declining mental or physical health, lost enthusiasm, sudden resignation, erratic work performance, or burnout - the complete collapse of a person's ability to engage.

None of these are beneficial to the business, even leaving aside the consequences for the individual. Remedies after the event are difficult, slow and often ineffective. Prevention, however, is much easier and far less disruptive, and an accommodating workplace plays a significant role in prevention.

Prevention is better...

Rather than get bogged down in the minutiae of all possible steps that could be taken, for every scenario, in every type of workplace, it may be best to step back and consider this issue on the basis of principles and practicalities. The topic also often gets mired in discussions about the meaning of "reasonable accommodation." In reality the accommodations people require mostly cost little or nothing to implement, have minimal or no impact on others, and surprisingly often, they make the work environment better for everyone and can even reduce costs.

Each environment must be approached on a case-by-case basis as the needs of individuals, the size of the staff population, the design of buildings, the extent blended working, remote working, flexi-hours or job share can be applied, the extent and nature of customer-facing work and so on all play into the solutions. An IT support contact centre, a logistics business, and a clothing retail business present utterly different issues to address, for example.

Listening and attitudes

When designing solutions, centring the perspectives of the individual(s) themselves is essential. This means putting the person in the driving seat end-to-end during the process, and encouraging them to specify the solutions that work for them, checking in with them during implementation to ensure the outcomes will be as intended. It also means being open to adjustments, and being conscious that new possibilities can arise due to technical innovations, an individual's understanding of their needs, and the simple fact that circumstances change over time.

Much of what has been said here so far has had changes to workplace design, seating arrangements, lighting, and to policies around working hours, breaks, and so on in mind. But what creates the most effective accommodations, and minimises staff churn is... attitude. And attitude is free.

Our 'new' normal

The course of the Coronavirus pandemic forced us all to think differently and work differently, but many of the mechanisms we've seen implemented to facilitate home working and blended working have existed for decades. One of the authors of this document experienced hot-desking, flexi-hours and job-sharing in the early 1990s, remotely managed international project teams in the late 1990s, and then worked over dial-up connections during the early 2000s for a business based in Canada, as part of a team reaching from Alaska to Mexico, Ireland to Japan. As we rapidly discovered in 2020, we have the capability to transform our ways of working, and even increase productivity and reduce costs as a side-effect. There was little standing in the way of that shift five or ten years ago.

How we frame policies, design processes, and engage with people are based, above all, on attitudes, and those attitudes can be built on outdated assumptions, misinformation or just 'how we've always done it.' Each of these can change dramatically simply by gaining new information – for example attending some online training (from AUsome Training, of course!) or speaking with your Neurodivergent staff about their concerns, goals, and the barriers they experience.

Your in-house experts

By definition, non-Neurodivergent people cannot understand Neurodivergent needs or obstacles except by seeking out and engaging with Neurodivergent perspectives. Equally, within the Neurodivergent population, experiences and obstacles vary widely. Nobody has all the answers. For attitudes to change, some things must be let go, ideas like Neurodivergent people are childish, feckless, unreliable, incapable. Hopefully we've put a dent in that. But that's just a first step towards

Neurodiversification. Again, some of the earlier sections have touched on changes in policy, work environment and so on that can help.

But the hardest thing to let go of can be the idea that the organisation – which in most cases is hierarchical in structure – cannot effectively design and implement appropriate changes from above. Almost always, those most in need of accommodation are not at the top and their input, if it is sought, may be filtered through several layers of management before it connects with policy development.

Neurodiversification relies on expertise. Nobody knows an individual's needs, and the solutions that work for them, better than the individual themselves. Very likely, they have decades of hands-on experience designing effective, nimble, low-cost solutions... because they have had to.

Recognising that expertise and enabling the individual to take the lead (with line manager and HR support) makes sense. Often this can result in solutions as straightforward as 'schedule meetings during the morning' or 'turn this desk sideways' or 'staff can wear ear defenders at work.'

This is not just about letting go of existing approaches, but having viable alternatives, and thinking about how staff can take a lead on topics like this means first having mechanisms which enable that to happen. Neurodiversification comes from Neurodivergent insights.

Designing policies and processes

The biggest shift, then, in beginning to Neurodiversify, is perhaps to build policies and processes around principles rather than rules. Again, this requires attitudinal change – not just a reimagining of how things should work, but diligent integration of what may be a major shift in culture.

Consider the following simple observations:

- Stress generates poor decisions
- Diverse views generate innovation
- If it helps people work better, it's worth having
- Trust makes for good teams

It is easy enough to agree with these as principles, but transforming them into practical strategies that can be implemented in the workplace...? Really, they are questions in disguise, such as 'what makes our staff stressed?' or 'what would help people work better?' and it is in seeking the answers to those questions that the actual obstacles encountered by staff – not just Neurodivergent staff – come to the surface, specific to the actual business environment and actual staff needs your organisation experiences.

Yes, this means work, and challenging established practices and assumptions. We know that's easily said and far harder to put into practice. The day-to-day challenges of business only complicate the issue. However, Neurodiversification is possible through trust-based engagement with Neurodivergent staff and, despite the common perception, often requires little or no expenditure.

Simple examples

To give a feel for the kinds of change that can make a workplace welcoming to Neurodivergent people, and make Neurodiversification a reality, here are some simple examples:

- Allowing non-customer facing staff wear the clothes they feel most comfortable with
- Lowering lighting intensity (with the happy bonus of reduced energy costs)
- Permitting staff use 'stim tools' or 'fidgets'
- Facilitating comfort breaks and opportunities to stretch or pace
- Encouraging staff to use eye shades, ear defenders, or tinted lenses to reduce distraction
- Facilitating flexible hours and leveraging the opportunities of blended working

What next?

Covid has forced us all to rethink what 'at work' means, what is viable, and what is necessary. There have been benefits arising from the changes forced on us, not least the sudden access to employment remote working has created for some Neurodivergent people.

That was an accidental side-effect of a global emergency, but it flags up how different attitudes can open doors. We are still building what the post-Covid version of 'new normal' looks like, but this time we have the luxury of planning the change.

One short document cannot offer packaged solutions, only provide information and ideas, and point in directions worth investigating in the process of Neurodiversification.

AUsome Training and our trusted associates are well placed to assist with that process, and would be happy to discuss your next steps, advise on inclusive language, reframing your policies, and working with your staff to design effective solutions.

Thank you for taking time to explore ideas in this document. If you have any further questions on Neurodiversification please feel free to email us hello@ausometraining.com

Is Your Workplace Neurodivergent-inclusive?

We have spoken about the role language use plays, reflecting underlying culture, limiting (or expanding) possibilities, and sending signals. Often we communicate through 'scripts' we have inherited within a profession, an industry, or just from the social environment we are familiar with. That makes the language we use a good litmus test for the attitudes that prevail in an organisation.

The following table is designed to give a feel for both how commonplace exclusionary or invalidating language is. It is anything but exhaustive, just enough to help you get a feel for where your organisation currently is on the Neurodiversification journey.

Do you say or hear...	How it reads
Not a good fit	Our organisation is a monoculture lacking diversity
A drain on resources / That will have cost implications	I don't value your contribution to the business
Well, nobody else has a problem with it	I don't believe you / Your needs don't matter
The dress code doesn't allow that	Our dress code is arbitrary and exclusionary
Teambuilding exercises	Almost certainly something that will reinforce norms and exclude minorities
We expect staff to be flexible	I'm not interested in accommodating your individual needs
It's a tough world / No pain, no gain / Thick skinned / I expect you to up your game	See above...
Well, unless you have a medical cert...	Unless the law forces my hand, I'm not going to accommodate anything

A Sample List of Neurodivergent Types

Neurodiversity refers to variances from the majority with reference to the human nervous system. This encompasses the brain and spinal cord, and all the nerves that sense and regulate throughout the body. Listing all forms of Neurodivergence is not feasible. We can only give a sense of the broad range Neurodivergence encompasses. Note that a Neurodivergent individual may slot into several labelled categories, and be 'multiply neurodivergent.'

Common examples	Some less-recognised examples
ADHD/ADD Autistic Bipolar Cerebral Palsy (CP) Down Syndrome Dyscalculia Dyspraxia Dyslexia Epilepsy Giftedness Learning disabilities Migraine Multiple Sclerosis (MS) OCD Parkinson's Tourette Syndrome	Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) Apraxia Dementia Depression Dysgraphia Foetal Alcohol Syndrome (FAS) Fibromyalgia Hyperlexia Irlen Syndrome PDA Personality types Rejection Sensitive Dysphoria (RSD) Seizure conditions Sensory processing differences (SPD) Synaesthesia Tic conditions