



Think Ahead

NEURODIVERSITY IN ACCOUNTANCY

About ACCA

We are ACCA (the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants), a globally recognised professional accountancy body providing qualifications and advancing standards in accountancy worldwide.

Founded in 1904 to widen access to the accountancy profession, we've long championed inclusion and today proudly support a diverse community of over **252,500** members and **526,000** future members in **180** countries.

Our forward-looking qualifications, continuous learning and insights are respected and valued by employers in every sector. They equip individuals with the business and finance expertise and ethical judgement to create, protect and report the sustainable value delivered by organisations and economies.

Guided by our purpose and values, our vision is to develop the accountancy profession the world needs. Partnering with policymakers, standard setters, the donor community, educators and other accountancy bodies, we're strengthening and building a profession that drives a sustainable future for all.

Find out more at **accaglobal.com**

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Nic Chambers, Managing Director, Michael Page Malaysia

Hiren Shukla, EY Global and Americas Neuro-Diverse Center of Excellence Leader

Andrew Chong, Co-founder and Investor uPledge

Nikki Reed, Financial Controller, The Ritz London

Susan Ball, Employment Tax Partner, RSM UK Tax

Paolo Davighi FCCA, Finance Change, HM Revenue and Customs

Hajra Babariya, Director of Education Services, BPP

Kate Coulson, Associate Dean for Assessment, BPP

Authors:



Jamie Lyon FCCA,

Global Head of Skills, Sectors and Technology,
Policy and Insights, ACCA

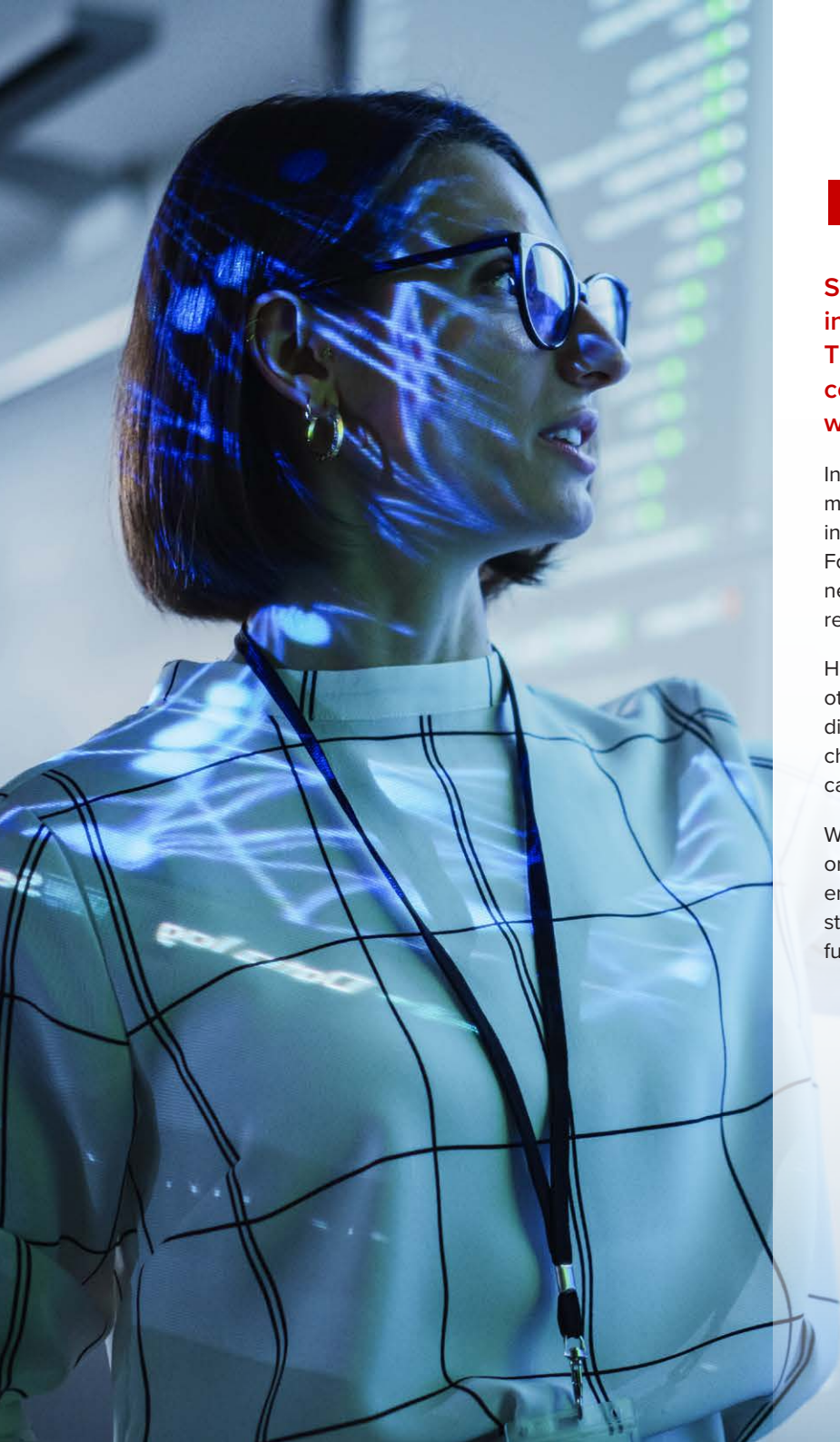
Jamie is based in London and leads a team of policy and insight experts who are dedicated to exploring the most significant challenges impacting the business world and global economy. Aside from his leadership responsibilities, Jamie particularly specialises in the future of work, human capital, and talent management issues impacting the workplace today. He also serves as a technical and policy adviser at the International Federation of Accountants in New York, USA. He initially qualified as an accountant with Royal & Sun Alliance Insurance Group Plc before pursuing a finance career at Marks and Spencer Plc in London.



Tania Martin,

Neuro-inclusion Consultant, Trainer and Speaker,
PegSquared

Tania is an experienced neuro-inclusion consultant, trainer and speaker with over two decades of corporate experience. As a key member of the team behind the award winning EY UK Neuro-Diverse Centre of Excellence, she led the development of a supportive ecosystem and implemented neuro-inclusive people processes. With a background in leading complex transformation programmes across both people and technology in large global organisations, Tania combines neurodiversity expertise with real-world corporate experience to approach the challenge of neuro-inclusion in the workplace differently. Her journey includes navigating her own career with ADHD, diagnosed in 2022, providing a distinctive firsthand perspective on neurodiversity at work.



Introduction

Since its foundation in 1904, ACCA has held inclusion and access to all as a core value. This isn't just a moral imperative – there is continued evidence that diverse and inclusive workforces benefit both business and society.

In this report, we explore the issue of neurodiversity – a marker of diversity that is finally becoming more recognised in education systems across the world, and by organisations. For the accountancy and finance profession, ensuring neurodivergent talent can access the profession and enjoy rewarding careers is key to its future success.

Here, we present several stories from ACCA members and other professional accountants. They illustrate how being diagnosed as neurodivergent presents both work-based challenges as well as endowing individuals with unique capabilities that they've used for career advantage.

We also reflect on some of the practical strategies that organisations can adopt to better support neurodivergent employees. This narrative is at the heart of a good news story, serving to remind us of the strength that comes from fully embracing neurodivergent talent within the profession.



What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is defined as a natural variation in how the brain processes information. Every one of us thinks and behaves differently; our brains are as unique as our fingerprints, and our neural pathways are constantly evolving. For a proportion of the population, nonetheless, there is a greater than usual cognitive variation in how their brains process information.

From an evolutionary perspective, this makes sense – historically, early humans needed those who could exploit knowledge that already exists, and others who could explore new opportunities (Taylor et al, 2022). Examples would be those who were experts in crafting tools versus those who were comfortable with ambiguity, taking risks and making decisions. Having people at the extremes of thinking styles has benefitted our evolution as a species – you could go as far as saying it was fundamental to our survival.

Over time, however, a societal expectation that people should conform to common behaviours within the workplace developed. And those who did not conform to expected behaviours have had to either try and fit in (by masking), or often face adverse employment consequences. In the UK, for example, fewer than 30% of individuals with autism are in any form of paid employment (Office for National Statistics, 2022) – while many other neurodivergent individuals in employment are afraid of sharing their diagnosis for fear of being judged or treated differently.

Neurodiversity has for many years been viewed through a medical lens that focuses on deficits and disorders. The narrative is changing, however, and societies are starting to recognise the unique perspectives and strengths of those who are outliers in cognitive thinking – and what they bring to the workplace.

Our research is based on stories from just a few accountancy professionals who are neurodivergent, yet thriving in the working world. It helps to define the reasons why cognitive variation matters – and why embracing neurodiversity is not only a moral imperative, but makes good business sense.

Neurodivergent conditions

There are several neurodevelopmental conditions under the neurodiversity umbrella. The **main** neurotypes are detailed in table below (there are others too). It's important to note that most of the neurotypes listed are lifelong conditions with which individuals are born – and that they have no bearing on a person's intelligence.

Those who are neuro-different are often described as having 'spikey profiles'. That is, they may have peaks in strengths or dips in other areas when compared to a neurotypical individual who has a flatter, more consistent profile. Some examples of those strengths and challenges are included in the table, although this list is not exhaustive.

Each neurodivergent individual experiences their strengths and challenges as a unique blend. There's a high chance that individuals have multiple neurotypes, whether diagnosed or not – therefore stereotypes of assumed behaviours related to neurotypes are unhelpful. Additionally, challenges present on a spectrum – where some have more severe challenges than others.



The most common neurotypes:

Attention deficient hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)

-  **High-level definition:** Neurodevelopmental condition characterised by inattention, hyperactivity and impulsivity
-  **May have strengths such as:** Connecting information; analytical skills; hyperfocus
-  **May experience challenges with:** Time management; attention to detail; organisation; planning

Autism

-  **High-level definition:** Spectrum condition characterised by challenges with communication, social interaction and repetitive behaviours
-  **May have strengths such as:** Attention to detail; analytical thinking; problem solving
-  **May experience challenges with:** Sensory processing; risk of miscommunication; multi-tasking

Dyslexia

-  **High-level definition:** Learning difficulty that affects reading and spelling skills
-  **May have strengths such as:** Visual thinking; building relationships; pattern spotting
-  **May experience challenges with:** Sound processing; difficulties getting ideas on paper; reading and spelling

Dyspraxia

-  **High-level definition:** Neurological disorder that impacts movement and coordination
-  **May have strengths such as:** Big-picture thinking; empathy; verbal communication
-  **May experience challenges with:** Difficulty learning new processes; fine motor skills; memory

Dyscalculia

-  **High-level definition:** Specific learning difficulty when understanding numbers
-  **May have strengths such as:** Creativity; strategic thinking; organisational skills
-  **May experience challenges with:** Pattern recognition; sequencing; mathematical ability

Tourette's syndrome

-  **High-level definition:** Neurological condition that results in involuntary muscle movements and sounds
-  **May have strengths such as:** Creativity; empathy; energetic character
-  **May experience challenges with:** Anxiety; sensory needs; tics (verbal & non-verbal)

Acquired brain injury

-  **High-level definition:** Damage sustained to the brain that may be caused by injury, illness, drug or alcohol abuse
-  *Effects will vary depending on the part of the brain that has sustained the injury*

Why do many people remain undiagnosed?

Many neurodivergent individuals go undiagnosed, often only recognising cognitive variations later in life. Others may not seek a diagnosis despite struggling, which may be owing to:

- **Culture differences** – in how neurodiversity is perceived by certain societies and generations.
- **Gender** – females often present differently, and it is commonly accepted that women may be more likely to 'mask' their conditions.
- **Privilege** – relating to access to the medical profession to be diagnosed, in some countries there are extensive waiting lists.
- **Educational biases** – if a neurodivergent individual happens to perform well at school, there may be a perception that there is no problem and challenges may go unnoticed.

Therefore, if an individual decides to self-identify as neurodivergent, it should be respected.

Neurodiversity and language

The language surrounding neurodiversity can be emotive, powerful and at times even harmful. It's important to be guided on the correct use of language – rather than avoid having the conversation at all.

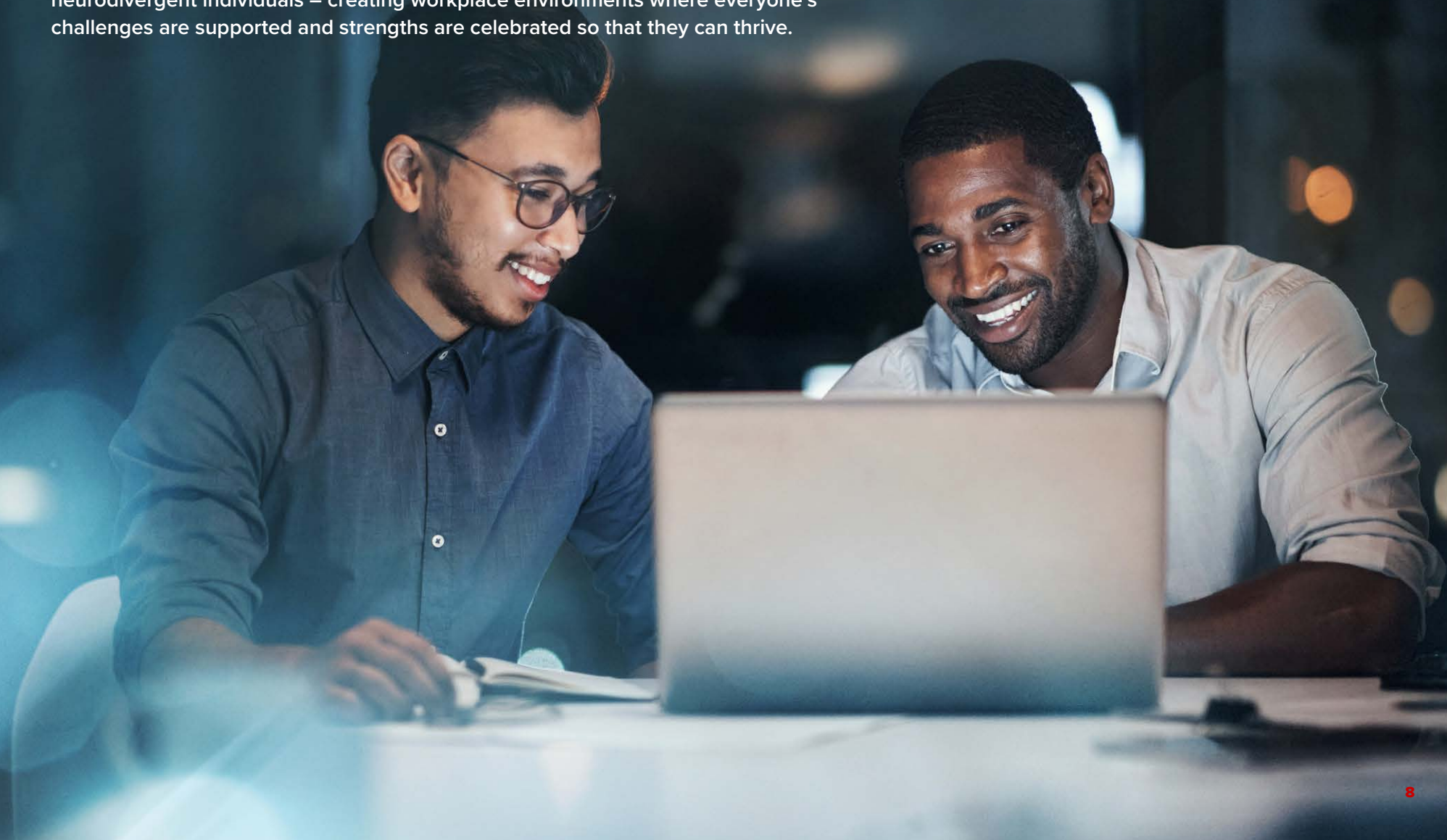
Key terms

- **Neurodiversity:** Applies to everyone – every brain has a natural variation.
- **Neurodivergent/neuro-difference/neurominority:** Describes those with a defined cognitive variation in how the brain learns and processes information. They include 'neurotypes' such as ADHD, autism, dyslexia, dyspraxia (DCD), dyscalculia and Tourette's syndrome.
- **Neurotypical/neuromajority:** Describes individuals who display 'typical' cognitive thinking. It applies to the majority of people.

- ✓ When approaching the subject, be guided by the person you are addressing: *how do they want you to refer to their neurotype?*
- ✓ When talking about an individual with a diagnosis – always use 'person first' language, that is 'a person with autism', not 'an autistic person'. **An individual is not defined by their diagnosis.**
- ✓ Additionally, labels such 'high functioning' and 'low functioning' or 'disorders' are now outdated and potentially harmful or offensive.

Why neurodiversity matters

It's estimated that between 15-20% of the population are neurodivergent. Consequently, organisations have an ethical responsibility to include and support neurodivergent individuals – creating workplace environments where everyone's challenges are supported and strengths are celebrated so that they can thrive.



Over the last 10 years, organisations have started to recognise the value that neurodivergent individuals can bring – creating hiring programmes that actively target neurodivergent talent to undertake specific roles. As the focus on neurodiversity has evolved, more individuals who have been masking their cognitive variation have started to share their diagnosis and hidden struggles with employers.

The focus has started to shift to re-education on what neurodiversity is, and how to provide support for these individuals. The next stage will see organisations begin to consider design principles for business processes that are inclusive for all – regardless of their neurotype.

Organisations that have made significant investment in this area have seen an impact on brand recognition, attracted new business, and gained access to an untapped talent pool – bringing innovation, creativity and problem-solving skills with them. Ultimately, a proactive approach to neurodiversity creates value for an organisation, both financially and socially.

While there are benefits for organisations that proactively seek neuro-inclusion, in some jurisdictions there is also a legal obligation to support neurodivergent individuals in the workplace. For example, the UK Equality Act 2010 recognises attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, dyslexia and dyspraxia as disabilities – and therefore protected characteristics. This means an organisation must provide reasonable adjustments to those who share such a neurotype.

Over the last decade, we've seen a significant increase in the number of employment tribunals that relate to neurodiversity, which is a reflection of the lack of support organisations are perceived to have provided.

The business benefits of embracing neurodiversity:

	Diverse thinking: Neurodiversity brings unique viewpoints and problem-solving approaches – allowing employees with different cognitive styles to contribute fresh ideas and innovative solutions.
	Increased productivity: Accommodating neurodivergent individuals enhances overall productivity – when employees are supported, they can focus on their work more effectively.
	Talent attraction: Organisations focusing on building neuro-inclusive workplaces attracts candidates – especially Generation Z, who are more driven by the social impact an organisation makes.
	Talent retention: A neuro-inclusive environment fosters loyalty and reduces turnover – employees appreciate workplaces that value their individual needs.
	Enhanced creativity: Neurodivergent individuals often think 'outside the box' – their creativity can lead to breakthroughs and novel solutions.
	Positive workplace culture: Inclusive practices promote a positive atmosphere where employees feel respected and valued – leading to better morale.

Our stories

Our research seeks to illuminate the stories of neurodivergent individuals within the accountancy profession. Interviews were conducted with a wide selection of participants – of different age, gender, ethnicity, cultural background and neurotype.

The research is motivated to understand the challenges these individuals face at work and in education; their relevant strengths; how organisations have implemented support at both the institutional and individual level; and thoughts towards the future of neurodiversity at work.

Their stories ultimately celebrate thinking differently.

We hope that you are as inspired reading these stories, as we were in speaking to the individuals who participated.

Navigating ADHD in the accountancy profession – powered by technology



Kate Rodde

Kate shares her story... but differently – using ‘Braided’ technology – technology built for astronauts now being used to help those who are neurodivergent.

BRAIDED’S COMMUNICATION SOLUTION ALLOWS FOR NATURAL AND SYNCHRONOUS COMMUNICATION AND HAS POTENTIAL APPLICATION BOTH IN WORKPLACES AND EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS.

Kate has until very recently worked for Braided Communications Ltd. Kate is a qualified accountant who has Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The interview was conducted via the Braided communication technology (see separate [case study](#)). She reflected on her experience of being interviewed in this manner, and emphasised how important the time to focus without any distractions helped her formulate her answers.

‘Through using the Braided technology you feel like you are being heard because you’re really putting your point of view across. You also feel like you’re not being observed... And I’m not being interrupted, distracted... Because my wonderful ADHD brain will go down 20 million tracks in a normal audio conversation.’

Like others we have interviewed, Kate’s ADHD presents with both great strengths and challenges in the workplace. Her biggest challenges are keeping track of time, regulating her emotions, oversharing, and feeling overwhelmed. To counteract these challenges, she admits to masking in the

workplace – a coping strategy often used by those who are neurodivergent to hide the challenges they are facing – which has consequences for Kate.

‘The impact for me is that my working days tend to be long as I still want to get everything done and not have it hang over me.’

Kate also highlights that challenges do not present consistently. Life events can have a significant impact on how her ADHD impacts her daily. An example she provides is during perimenopause when symptoms that had previously not been an issue became challenging, and she had to find new ways to support herself.

Throughout her career, support at work has often been inconsistent. At times Kate has had supportive line managers who understood her and how she worked. However, if there was a leadership change, this could be difficult for Kate – especially if they did not take the time to understand the value she brought to the organisation. This requirement to create a psychologically safe environment where someone can ask for help if needed is, in Kate’s opinion, critically important. Kate’s approach was to identify sponsors across the business who would champion her, and who both understood and valued her.

‘It is not dependent on my manager to determine my work life.’

Harnessing the strengths of those who are neurodivergent in the accountancy profession can bring different skills to different roles. Kate provided an example of two varying approaches to work that, when harnessed in the correct way, had significant value to the organisation. She remembers working with a financial accountant who had been diagnosed with autism:

'In many respects I guess he presented with a number of traits that may be associated with some autistic individuals (though not necessarily) – very focused on the detail around the financial accounting system, not very comfortable in a change environment, and I think he struggled with interpersonal relationships at work. But he made a fantastic technical accountant, and his work was always super accurate.'

In contrast to this, Kate describes herself as a big picture person, is confident talking to anyone about work, and prefers planning, understanding what makes a business 'tick', and can solve problems if given the autonomy to do so. As a result, she had the opportunity to build a new business area and manage new teams – something she loves to do.

'We are both neurodivergent. We are both accountants. We are friends, and have shared interests outside of work, but we are so different... and I think that difference is really important – there is not a one size fits all, and that difference can bring real benefits to an organisation in terms of capabilities.'

What does the future hold for the neurodiversity and the accountancy profession? Kate is optimistic. With progress being made in understanding the benefits of diverse thinking, it is clear that neurodivergent professionals bring immense value to teams. Research suggests that teams with neurodivergent individuals can be 30% more productive than those without them¹. However, the real success will come when organisations shift their focus to becoming neuro-inclusive and start adapting their processes to accommodate diverse thinking as standard. With this approach, the need for support will decrease, and true inclusion will become the norm.

**NEURODIVERSE TEAMS
RESULT IN HIGHER
PRODUCTIVITY AND
CREATIVITY AT WORK.**



SPOTLIGHT ON BRAIDED MEETINGS:

Technology designed for astronauts but applied for inclusive employee communication



Rob Brougham

Rob shares his story about developing 'Braided' technology – trialled by NASA and now starting to be used for inclusive workplace engagements.

BRAIDING IS A NEW COLLABORATION TOOL THAT IS DESIGNED TO HELP CREATE INCLUSIVE & EFFICIENT COLLABORATION ENVIRONMENTS USING WRITTEN RATHER THAN SPOKEN COMMUNICATION.

How does the technology work?

Braiding is a written method of communication and the basic idea behind the technology is that it gives everyone in a meeting the opportunity to contribute to the discussion equally. Topics or agenda items are displayed as separate discussion panels, called Braids, that are presented to the participants sequentially on a rotating virtual carousel. As the carousel rotates the debate on each topic builds. At the end you have a full written record with no need for anybody to take minutes.

Why may the technology be particularly helpful for some people with neurodivergent conditions?

One of the things we know about good communication in meetings is that it only happens when everyone is co-present with everyone else – ie where the conversation flows and is natural. That is quite different to co-location – you could be in a meeting room with a group of colleagues yet feel you are not really part of the conversation, perhaps a bit isolated. Co-presence on the other hand, requires synchrony which has a very specific definition – it means 'to have a shared focus of attention and behaviour, coordinated by a shared rhythm

and maintained over time.' So co-presence cannot occur in an environment which is asynchronous. Braiding essentially creates that environment which is synchronous, where co-presence can exist. In a simpler way, it levels the playing field of communication, giving everyone an equal voice.

Where did you get the idea for Braiding?

The idea was born out of challenges with space communication. Beyond what we call 'Low Earth Orbit', all communication between crew and ground is affected by time delay (what we call latency), caused by the great distance and the finite speed of light and radio waves. The delay is unavoidable. It applies to all communication throughout all future deep space (lunar and beyond) missions, but obviously communication time delays create all sorts of problems – even impacting crew health because of emotional isolation. Space Braiding was the first tool designed to mitigate the impact of latency. It does not remove or reduce latency – that would break the laws of physics – but instead it disguises latency because it can make two people separated by millions of kilometres feel as if they are having a natural, synchronous dialogue. Space Braiding is patented and has been tested in studies funded by the UK Space Agency, the European Space Agency, and NASA in collaboration with several academic partners including University College, London and Georgia Tech, USA. All results so far are positive – the preliminary data indicates that Space Braiding really works. It just so happens it has potential applications elsewhere in the business world for efficient and inclusive communication.

Lydia's autism opens up new unexpected career opportunities beyond accountancy as a day job



Lydia Stott

Lydia's honest story ends on a real high note, with her autism diagnosis leading to a role that is shaping how her organisation, Cooper Parry, supports its neurodivergent employees.

Lydia is a Diversity and Inclusion Advisor at Cooper Parry, a Young Ambassador for the National Autistic Society, and a qualified workplace needs assessor. She received an autism diagnosis at the age of 18, kickstarting her journey into advocacy. In conversation, Lydia's passion for neuro-inclusion in the workplace is very evident.

Her story is a familiar one for many neurodivergent people: her diagnosis was missed due to strong academic performance in school and Lydia instead internalised her struggles. As a teen, she was diagnosed with depression and anxiety.

INDIVIDUALS ARE OFTEN DIAGNOSED WITH ANXIETY AND DEPRESSION BEFORE A NEUROTYPIC IS IDENTIFIED – IF IDENTIFIED AT ALL. THE CO-MORBIDITY BETWEEN ANXIETY, DEPRESSION AND SOME NEURODIVERGENT CONDITIONS IS WELL ESTABLISHED.

Like many individuals who are neurodivergent, Lydia found school challenging. Despite excelling academically, she experienced frequent panic attacks from the age of nine and her mental health issues continued throughout her education. When numerous avenues of support failed to make a difference for Lydia, she began to question herself.

Why was she worse at coping than those around her? Her search for answers led her to an online course on autism in women from the National Autistic Society, and this was Lydia's lightbulb moment.

'Until you have the label 'autism', you will carry a thousand other labels. These might include lazy, difficult, incompetent, awkward, and oversensitive... The world tells you that this is who you are and you begin to believe it. Receiving my diagnosis gave me the permission I needed to reject these labels. I'm none of these things: I'm autistic and I'm navigating a world that hasn't been designed for me. That was the most liberating part of my diagnosis.'

'I USED TO THINK I WAS BAD AT BEING A HUMAN BEING. WITH AN AUTISM DIAGNOSIS, I NOW KNOW THAT I'M JUST BAD AT BEING NEUROTYPICAL. THAT'S SOMETHING I DON'T HAVE TO BE GOOD AT – BECAUSE I'M GREAT AT BEING AUTISTIC!'

While Lydia's diagnosis helped explain why she felt like she didn't fit in, it couldn't undo years of damage and mental health issues overnight. In 2020, she had a mental breakdown and reached a point of feeling suicidal. She had to quit her sixth form college just to keep herself alive.

In the first year of the pandemic, UK students received grades decided by mock exams and teacher assessments, meaning Lydia received A Levels based on the 18 months of college she had completed. She achieved straight A*s and an offer to study Mathematics at Cambridge University. Despite this remarkable outcome, Lydia made the decision to take a gap year to work on her mental health.

Following a temporary role in that year, Lydia realised that she did not want to go back to further education. Therefore, she declined her university offer and decided to become an accountant. She joined national accountancy firm, Cooper Parry, as an apprentice. Cooper Parry brand themselves as the 'Rebels of Accountancy' and are the largest B-Corp certified accountancy firm in the UK.

Alongside her day job auditing pension plans, Lydia became a member of the diversity and inclusion committee and led a company-wide campaign on neurodiversity. There was a strong desire from the organisation to support her. However, as she was the first openly autistic person in the company, she often found herself educating colleagues and managers about neurodiversity. Whilst she enjoyed this role, she found it exhausting to communicate her challenges, identify what adjustments would make a difference, and advocate for what she needed. After nine months, Lydia realised it wasn't working.

IDENTIFYING EFFECTIVE ADJUSTMENTS IS A PROCESS. NEURODIVERGENT PEOPLE ARE OFTEN EXPECTED TO MANAGE THIS ALONGSIDE THEIR FULL TIME JOB, WHICH PLACES ADDITIONAL STRESS ON THE INDIVIDUAL.

In December 2021, Lydia handed in her notice, but with one door closing, another opened. On the same day, the Chief People Officer at Cooper Parry offered Lydia a brand-new role in the organisation: diversity and inclusion coordinator. This role was created for Lydia after the company recognised it had an opportunity to live out its values louder.

'I am so proud to work for an organisation that is able to recognise their shortfalls and genuinely wants to make change, to support their staff appropriately. Leaders in Cooper Parry acknowledged my passion, strengths and experience, and invited me to join in that change-making process. This is a true example of a strengths-based organisation.'

Fast-forward to today, and Lydia is still driving Cooper Parry's progressive D&I strategy and advocating for neurodivergent talent at all levels. The company has implemented a Neurodiversity Policy, developed with input from neurodivergent people across the business. The support process includes mentoring support from Lydia herself, a community network for neurodivergent people, an information hub packed with ideas for strategies and adjustments that might help, and even funding private diagnoses (given the extensive waiting lists under the NHS).

In 2023, Lydia was highly commended by the Business Disability Forum for her work supporting neurodivergent people in the workplace.

'Neurodivergent people are the experts on their own experiences, but they're not necessarily the experts on workplace adjustments. At Cooper Parry, we don't expect individuals to know what accommodations they could ask for or what might help – we work together to give them ideas and autonomy.'

What are Lydia's top tips on creating a neuro-inclusive workplace?

- 1. Senior sponsorship is imperative** – culture comes from the top!
- 2. Educate the company about neurodiversity** – so neurodivergent people can save their energy for thriving in their careers.
- 3. Create a flexible support structure** – understanding that every individual will have unique strengths and challenges.
- 4. Equip managers to be allies** – neurodivergent people shouldn't have to advocate for themselves alone.
- 5. Listen to neurodivergent individuals** – often strategies to support neurodivergent people are actually beneficial for all.

'PEOPLE HAVE BEEN CHAMPIONING EDI FOR YEARS – NEURO-INCLUSION IS THE NEXT LOGICAL STEP IN CREATING A BETTER WORKPLACE FOR ALL! I LOVE THAT MY COMPANY AND ROLE ALLOW ME TO HELP PEOPLE ON A DAILY BASIS, BUT WE ALL HAVE A PART TO PLAY.'



SPOTLIGHT ON: THE ADDITIONAL BURDEN OF SENSORY CHALLENGES

'What does sensory overload feel like for me? It's bright, loud, painful. I feel it physically in my body. I can hear every sound and it's like they're all piling on top to crush me. Lights visually grow and pulse in my eyes. And as the overwhelming feeling grows, I just feel a desperate urge to escape and to leave this environment. This happens to many neurodivergent people because we can experience senses very differently.'

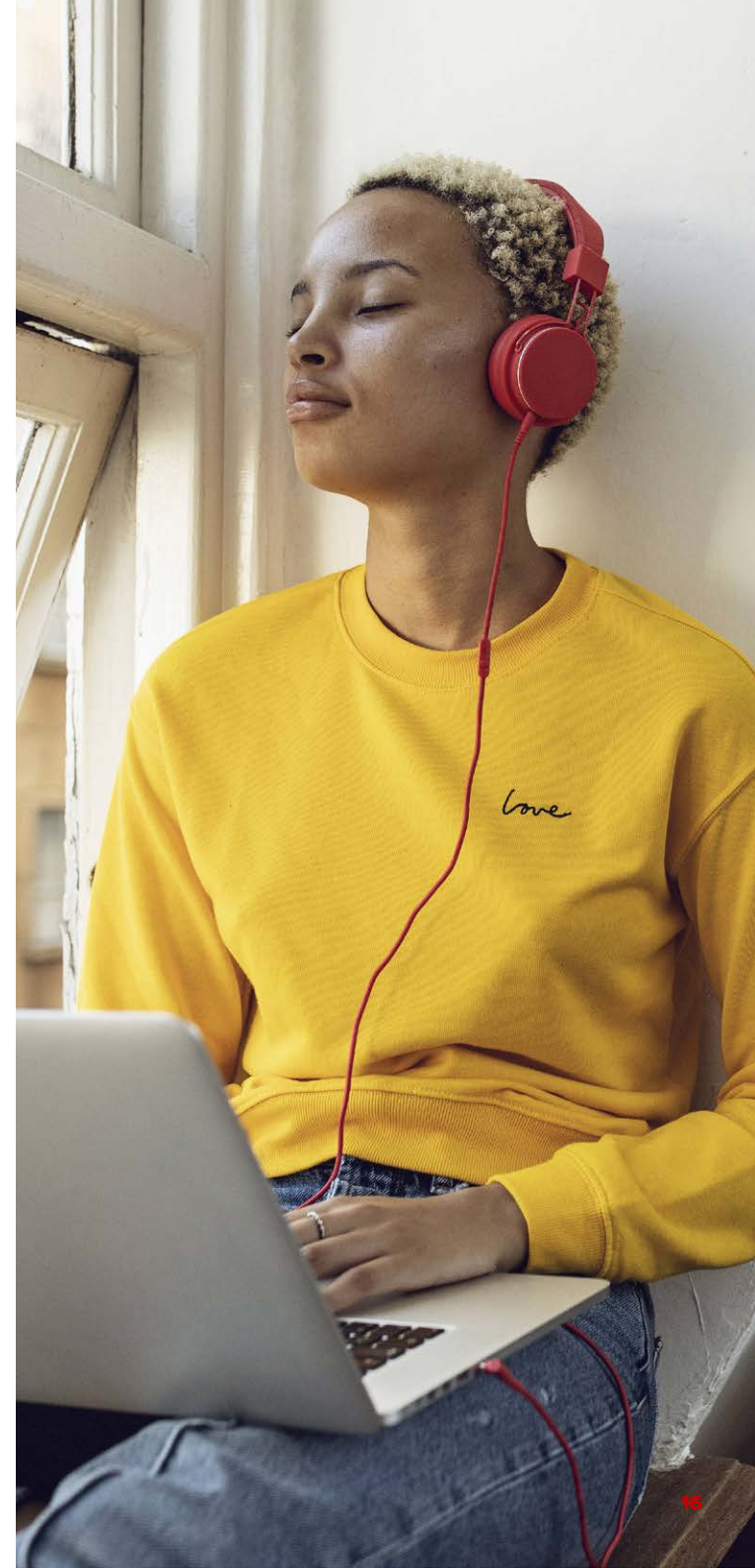
In our interview with Lydia Stott, Lydia eloquently described the additional sensory challenges people with autism and other neurotypes might experience. In addition to the five senses, she introduced interoception (identifying internal body signals) and proprioception (awareness of the body's movements and position). Differences in these senses can impact an individual's ability to self-regulate. Employers should be aware of the significant impact of sensory processing difficulties on individuals' daily functioning and overall well-being.

'I'm someone who feels things a lot. Emotions, pain, sensory input... Just being alive is a huge experience for me. This can be exhausting in the workplace, where you have little control of your sensory environment.'

However, an understanding of how she experiences the world allows her to meet her sensory needs while navigating the workplace – especially when required to go into the office.

'I used to feel a lot of anxiety around meeting my sensory needs, as it can mean I stand out as different. Through my advocacy work, I've gained the confidence to self-regulate in the workplace. I'm able to come into the office more frequently because I can wear sensory-friendly clothes, stim with fidget toys, put on sunglasses and headphones, and even sit on the floor during meetings if I need to. Although I may stand out as a result, ultimately I know I perform my best at work when I'm meeting my own needs.'

EMPLOYERS SHOULD BE AWARE OF THE SIGNIFICANT IMPACT OF SENSORY PROCESSING DIFFICULTIES ON INDIVIDUALS' DAILY FUNCTIONING AND OVERALL WELL-BEING.



Rethinking neurodiverse hiring



Nic Chambers

Nic shares his dyslexia, reflecting on the importance of inclusive recruitment practices, and broader organisational awareness and empathy for neurodiversity.

'If you can positively impact even just one person who's going through a difficult time, they can realise that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.'

For 18 years, Nic Chambers has led recruitment teams across Malaysia and Australia and is now the Managing Director of Michael Page Malaysia. It is however only in the last few years that Nic has started to share his own challenges with dyslexia. Inspired by a previous physically disabled CEO, Nic wrote an article on Neurodiversity on LinkedIn which received an overwhelming response, as individuals reached out to share their own experiences. Despite understanding that others may face greater obstacles than he has, Nic now believes in using his platform to raise awareness and motivate others to strive for success, whatever challenges they may face from their diagnosis.

WHILST NIC FEELS UNEASY AT TIMES ABOUT HIS DYSLEXIA, HE HAS FOUND WAYS TO WORK AROUND HIS CHALLENGES AND FORGE A SUCCESSFUL CAREER AS A LEADER.

Nic was only diagnosed with dyslexia at university after struggling with reading, writing, and dictation throughout his earlier school years. At school, he was happiest playing sports or doing math, but he faced challenges in other areas and was often labelled as 'lazy' and 'bone idle.' He recalls the difficulties of being undiagnosed at school.

'I was at an all-boys school, very traditional. And you just had to persevere. And it wasn't just that. It was also getting home and feeling that you're letting your parents down with constant bad grades. The comparison to siblings doing well at school was also challenging. I'd often dread my parents coming home from parent-teacher evenings, as there were two very different conversations had. And that, without doubt, made me more resilient for the future.'

Despite his diagnosis, Nic has had a successful career. Mostly he puts this down to following a career he is passionate about – but there are still challenges he needs to overcome on a day-to-day basis. To compensate for some of the challenges he faces with dyslexia, he adopts different strategies at work, such as using coloured backgrounds to aid with reading. However, he admits he can still be self-conscious when asked to write in front of others, often bypassing the scribing in workshops... or, if he is passed the pen and does not know how to spell a word, he writes in illegible joined-up writing so no-one can easily challenge the spelling.

'Sometimes people forget and make comments. I remember a time a while back when a colleague innocently joked about my spelling of a word. They didn't know I was dyslexic, but of course the incident stayed with me. It's not just about the present moment; it takes you back to those far more unhappier times. Of course nothing was meant by it... and they didn't realise the impact it could have.'

Despite these challenges, Nic views his dyslexia as bringing real benefits. He describes his strengths as resilience, empathy, attention to detail and focus. His resilience comes from growing up with undiagnosed dyslexia and no support; a useful skill as a recruitment leader in a complex, fast paced business environment. He also believes his dyslexia has helped build empathy; he genuinely cares for people's well-being and shows understanding when people struggle. Due to time spent extra checking for errors in work due to his dyslexia, he is also hyper-aware and often hyper-focused on particular issues, which again can sometimes be a strength (and a potential weakness) in the workplace.

For Nic, the pathway to more inclusive working practices starts in childhood – though he recognises that countries are at different stages on their journey to neuro-inclusion. In Malaysia, Nic suggests there may be cultural family expectations around education and career choices, yet where having a neurodivergent condition can be detrimental to initial academic success. In addition, there are issues accessing neurodiversity support with significant costs associated with it. He believes neurodiversity education in Malaysia needs to shift to focusing on what people can do, not what they cannot do, and that parents can help by focusing on the child's strengths and how they can harness these, building up their confidence and self-esteem.

At an organisational level, Nic suggests leaders needs to focus on two areas – education across the workforce on what neurodiversity is, and also the strengths and capabilities neurodivergent talent can bring to the business.

'I think first and foremost, it has to come down to education as a starting point and recognising that neurodivergence is a source of innovation, creativity and opportunity. And I think it's actually often middle managers and hiring managers in terms of where we need to educate most.'

Recently, I had a colleague with a neurodevelopmental disorder and I have had to adjust my own ways of working to accommodate this, as well as helping the individual understand how their own behaviour may impact myself and others in the business. This has to be done with empathy and very tactfully.'

In terms of tapping into neurodivergent talent, Nic believes the recruitment space is starting to change – with a move from generalists to more specialist roles, which may benefit some individuals with neurodivergent conditions.

'We're used to roles where we have a broad spectrum of responsibilities... Well, let's deconstruct it, just really break it down into the fundamentals of the role. And if that's what you're good at, and you're happy doing that, be the best in the business at just that.'

However, whilst he sympathises with companies on many of the challenges around attracting and retaining talent in a post-pandemic world now, Nic believes the focus on inclusive hiring practices needs to be a priority too.

'Organisations are making progress, but many still are very traditional with a continued focus on academics and qualifications. Truly inclusive recruitment practices needs to focus on aptitude, attitude and potential.'

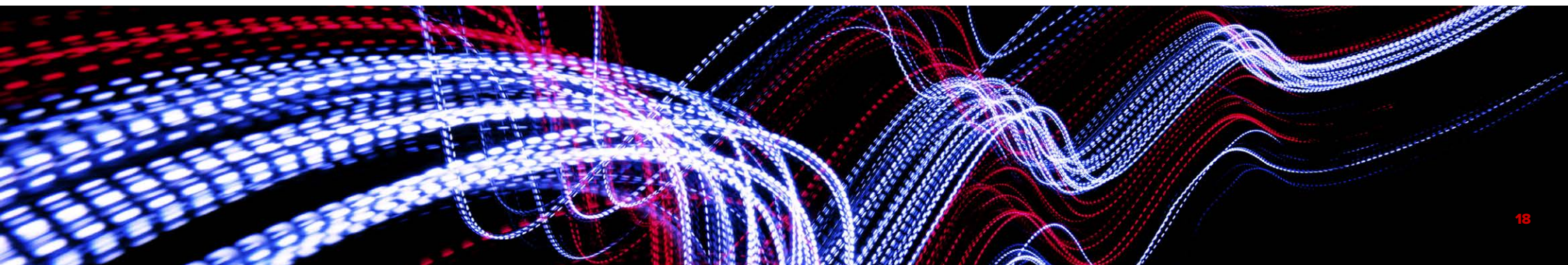
Nic admits this is harder to measure and therefore it is easy to switch back to what worked previously. But he says the companies who are leading the way with neuro-inclusive hiring are highlighting successful neurodivergent employees and focusing on attracting individuals with certain capabilities which can add value to the profession.

Additionally, as seen in ACCA's most recent Global Talent Trends 2024 study, Generation Z are more likely to be attracted to organisations that can clearly demonstrate social impact and inclusive cultures and recruitment practices. The organisations that don't embrace these practices can be left behind quickly.

Nic's story is everything about the opportunity to draw on the individual talent and strengths that neurodivergent employees can bring to the workforce. By focusing on educating employees, hiring managers and line managers to think differently about neurodiverse talent, organisations are better placed to build a more neuro-inclusive working world for the future.

'The days of the generalist, I think are starting to go. And we will see more and more specialist roles requiring specialist skills. And that then, I think, plays into the hands of diverse talent.'

THE JOURNEY TO NEURO-INCLUSION IN ORGANISATIONS IS ONLY AT THE START – THERE IS MUCH WORK TO DO.



AN EMPLOYER PERSPECTIVE:

Embracing neurodivergent talent design at EY to drive business value



Hiren Shukla

A lack of purpose and a feeling of not fitting into the workplace led to Hiren building a team of neurodivergent technologists that has been a catalyst for change for neuro-inclusive design at EY across the world.

'I anchored a hypothesis on the concept of – if you could harness the power of thinking differently, you will innovate, you'll accelerate transformation, you will see things that the world is not seeing today.'

Hiren's own story is inspiring, the youngest of seven children, his family left East Africa in the wake of the expulsion of Asian families from Uganda in the early 1970s. His family won a visa lottery to go to the US and landed in New York with 'only the clothes on their back and unable to speak English'. Despite this challenging start, Hiren went on to university, achieved an accounting degree and his Certified Public Accountant (CPA) qualification.

It looked like Hiren was destined for a solid career in accounting. But reflecting back on this, he felt his purpose and creative needs were not being fully met in a mainstream accounting career – in fact, the experience reinforced his concerns about having to make a constant effort to 'fit in'. It was a theme that followed Hiren throughout his life.

'Growing up in this constant effort to fit in, which was the goal. Oh, you must fit in. This was the narrative always. And always feeling a bit like, well, I feel different, but how come I'm the only one in the room also thinking different and being challenged by things?'

Eventually Hiren acquired a role outside his tax consulting role, in the innovation team at EY, and it was here where he started to consider how could he connect this power of thinking differently to what he saw as a huge untapped talent pool. At the same time his interest in neurodiversity, and recognising the unique skills and capabilities neurodivergent employees could bring to the workplace, began to flourish. At first hand he also saw how EY were potentially missing out on a huge talent pool, with highly intelligent and capable neurodivergent applicants unable to successfully navigate EY's recruitment processes.

'Becoming more familiar with neurodiversity as a concept, I was entirely struck by the fact that there was this huge, almost invisible portion of the world's population that was often entirely overlooked, or indeed disadvantaged, when it came to acquiring good jobs and good careers. It was here that I had the good fortune to get support to set up the first of EY's Neuro-Diverse Centres of Excellence in the US.'

IN SETTING UP EY'S FIRST NEURO-DIVERSE CENTRE OF EXCELLENCE, HIREN REALISED IN ORDER TO GAIN SPONSORSHIP FOR THE PROGRAMME, HE WOULD NEED TO APPROACH THIS NOT ONLY FROM AN INCLUSION PERSPECTIVE, BUT FROM A BUSINESS PERSPECTIVE.

'The business case for the centre was tying together the power of thinking differently to business outcomes – supporting innovation, accelerating our transformation efforts, harnessing new skills. All of this was very engaging and important to key stakeholders. And I think that narrative is so important because that meant we could strip away any personal or emotional approach that business leaders may have initially perceived. Absolutely we have a moral imperative here, but it was the real benefit to the business too that was the key.'

INCLUSION IS ALWAYS THE RIGHT THING TO DO – BUT MOST PEOPLE IN THE BUSINESS WORLD THINK ABOUT THIS SECONDARY TO THE NEED TO CREATE VALUE AND EXECUTE PROJECTS. TYING THESE TWO THINGS TOGETHER WAS KEY TO THE SUCCESS OF THE NEURODIVERSITY CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE AT EY.

Hiren began by focusing the centre's efforts on EY's emerging technology division, where there was both a recognised skills gap but also a continuous need to upskill and reskill with an emphasis on harnessing unique capabilities.

'Often with neurodivergent employees you find individuals who can think differently due to their sometimes "spiky" profile in creativity, or in pattern recognition, their ability to hyper-focus on particular issues – attributes such as those can often help accelerate the value that we will bring to our clients... they may approach a problem differently, they may communicate differently, they may learn very differently... but they will bring huge amounts of value.'

Hiren concludes reflecting on the courage that many neurodivergent individuals are finding in the workplace today. Courage to speak out, to share their stories, to say 'I am here' sometimes hidden in plain sight within an organisation. His hope for the future is that more people come forward to share their stories.

'We see neuroinclusion as a gateway to universal design and application. Because frankly, a rising tide lifts all boats, as they say. This is where I think we ultimately say we're going to have a much greater halo effect for everyone. I think that's where you start engaging more people who are not a parent or a carer or have nothing to do in this conversation. It benefits everyone.'



SPOTLIGHT ON: A CORNERSTONE IDEA AT THE HEART OF THE NEURO-DIVERSE CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE – THE TALENT INNOVATION MODEL

A cornerstone idea of the Neuro-Diverse Centres of Excellence was the 'Talent Innovation Model', where traditional recruitment processes were deconstructed away from the behavioural based recruitment models, instead shifting to performance based observational process which stimulated the work environment, the communication dynamics and environmental stimuli over a period of a few days rather than in a single hour interview.

'In traditional recruitment processes we were assessing someone's behaviour during a set of random questions and the ability for that person to communicate, articulate, and create rapport... but what is the correlation of that to actual performance? There is often very little correlation.'

This represented a fundamental shift in how EY recruited through the centres. But to create any lasting change, proving the concept was essential. Additionally in a large organisation such as EY, the change management challenge around this concept was very significant. Yet the switch proved very successful. Today, there are over 850 people employed across 23 Neuro-Diverse Centres of Excellence within EY.

'I'll be honest, I didn't expect the impact we have come to see across the world in EY. We have so many amazing stories to tell, for example, the pizza delivery guy who identified as neurodivergent, but then who within a few weeks of recruitment was not only building machine learning, but fixing and correcting algorithms that the current team were unable to. It was quite remarkable.'

I remember we had a team event in EY's New York office, attended by 400 clients and the global chairman, where team members from the Neuro-Diverse Centres had volunteered to be on a panel. One of the questions that was asked to them was – "what has this job given you?" And without skipping a beat, one of them said, very honestly, "this job has given me a sense of self-worth." And you could hear a pin drop in that room because no one could believe that somebody would be so honest in front of 400 people – I think it not only inspired us as a team, but I think it challenged the rest of us to say this is what vulnerability and authenticity truly look like, and that has to be good from a cultural perspective.'



How neurodivergent individuals can thrive as entrepreneurs



Andrew Chong

Andrew Chong's journey from an accountant at EY to a successful entrepreneur underscores the potential of neurodivergent individuals.

As someone diagnosed with ADHD in childhood, Andrew has navigated the challenges and connected with the strengths of his differences to excel in his roles as CEO and chief product officer at two start-ups in financial services and real estate. His story is a testament to the positive impact of neurodiversity in the workplace and offers valuable insights into fostering an inclusive environment.

CULTURAL DIFFERENCES CAN HAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON HOW A CHILD EXPERIENCES THEIR NEUROTOPE GROWING UP.

Andrew's understanding of neurodiversity is rooted in inclusivity and recognition of differences. Growing up in Malaysia, where cognitive differences were often not necessarily well understood or embraced, he experienced first hand the challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals. This was also reflected in the schooling system, where there were common expectations around how children performed in the education system, with few allowances for children learning in different ways. However, he is hopeful that societal acceptance of conditions such as neurodiversity is gradually improving across different regions in the world.

'Being told the way you're doing things is wrong or not standard and then to be able to push over your ideas and say, "No, I think it's right, I'm going to prove it to you that it's right".'

Prior to embarking on his entrepreneurial journey, the catalyst for Andrew's growing interest in neurodiversity in the workplace was his experience of working with colleagues from EY's Wavespace Artificial Intelligence Centre of Excellence in Madrid. The organisation made special accommodations for neurodiverse employees, including dedicated managers and tailored workplace policies.

'The program at the Centre was quite robust. The technology field in particular is likely to be attractive to many neurodivergent individuals, and I certainly saw lots of support and interactions put in place there to ensure the work was more accommodating to the specific needs of neurodivergent employees who were bringing some pretty specialised skills into the centre.'

The next step in Andrew's journey was to venture out on his own. Today, he is the CEO and co-founder of a technology startup, as well as holding a separate job in the real estate industry, juggling numerous and often competing

responsibilities... and he is a firm believer in entrepreneurship being particularly suitable to many neurodivergent individuals. This need for frequent change and stimulation can be a recognised trait with particular neurodivergent conditions, and Andrew has leveraged it to his advantage.

'The entrepreneurial ecosystem is intrinsically more open and, in many respects, has a higher appetite for talent that breaks the mould such as neurodivergent talent. If you have a good idea, and you have particular skills and capabilities that are valuable, there are sometimes less barriers to entry than in the corporate world. The constant stimulation and challenge for me works very well. If I focus on doing one thing, I can't do it. I need to do one thing and then distract myself with something else.'

Andrew also explains how his diagnosis influences his work habits, allowing him to manage multiple roles successfully, and helping him maintain his productivity. He uses a mix of digital tools (such as Asana for project management; Miro for mind mapping; and Jira for technical workflow) as well as physical trackers (calendars, notebooks, sketch boards, business-oriented canvases), allowing him to track his tasks and keep his thoughts organized through meticulous note-taking. This is also helpful when managing teams of increasing sizes.

'My diagnosis has influenced some of the tools and practices I use at work, but also beyond work I have boards for my personal life, things I'm doing with my family, and my relationship. I need to keep track of everything or else I will lose track of it. It gives me the control I need.'

THE ENTREPRENEURIAL ECOSYSTEM IS INTRINSICALLY MORE OPEN AND, IN MANY RESPECTS, HAS A HIGHER APPETITE FOR TALENT THAT BREAKS THE MOULD SUCH AS NEURODIVERGENT TALENT.

Andrew recommends finding the right support communities and professional help. He also emphasises the importance of screening companies for genuine inclusivity. Looking ahead, Andrew is optimistic about the future of neurodiversity, hoping for a global increase in neurodiverse hires, and he cites the role technology can play in improving recruitment practices and driving more inclusive hiring.

'As long as there's technology and advancements, that's one of the big drivers currently for high inclusion in the future.'



Against all the odds



Nikki Reed

A later life diagnosis of dyslexia started to make sense of the many challenges Nikki has had to overcome: a story of true perseverance against the odds.

'I guess I just felt something wasn't quite right, but I sort of ignored it for a very long time. It took me 12 years to pass my ACCA exams, it was such a struggle and on reflection I just wish I'd been diagnosed sooner to get the support quicker.'

Nikki Reed has been the Financial Controller of the Ritz London for the past three years with a career spanning 33 years in the hospitality industry. In March 2021, Nikki sought out and received a diagnosis of dyslexia ahead of sitting her final ACCA exam in June 2022 at the age of 48 – having spent 12 years battling against all the odds to get qualified. Yet her understanding of the real challenges faced by those with dyslexia started with the diagnosis of her teenage son. Witnessing at first hand the daily challenges he faced, particularly through school, she began to consider whether in fact she also was dyslexic.

NIKKI'S UNDERSTANDING OF THE REAL CHALLENGES FACED BY THOSE WITH DYSLEXIA STARTED FOLLOWING THE DIAGNOSIS OF HER TEENAGE SON.

Nikki's natural ability to work as an accountant in a world-famous hotel was complemented by her recent accomplishment of obtaining her ACCA qualification in 2022, making her the first individual in her family to achieve such a professional milestone. Her mum, who worked as a bookkeeper, greatly influenced her career path, and her

inspiring achievements have now also motivated her son to pursue a career as an accountant, making him the first in their family to attend university. It also brings home to Nikki how the reality of an individual's upbringing, location, and school can significantly influence their capacity to attain a diagnosis and obtain crucial support.

'I grew up in a very working-class background, and the school I attended really wasn't anything special. In fact, our academic year was one of the worst the school had ever had in terms of exam results apparently, so expectations were pretty low! But also of course, back then we knew so little about neurodiversity and dyslexia too, so school for me was a real struggle. But somehow I knew I had it in me to make something of my life.'

Despite the lack of focus at school, Nikki was determined to forge a career in accountancy and eventually go on to complete her ACCA professional exams. However, this was not without challenges. Nikki's completion of her ACCA qualification was hindered by her dyslexia, and she failed some of her exams. In the examinations she devoted time to highlighting crucial elements of the exam answers but was still challenged to find the right words or occasionally she left words out unintentionally. She says that while her verbal language skills are strong, she struggles with writing and finds it difficult to communicate on paper in the same way as with spoken language. When reading the exam questions, she found the subtleties and the subtext of the questions challenging.

'In the exams if I could actually verbalise what I was thinking and not have to write it down, it just would have been twenty times easier.'

In December 2020, after being made redundant during COVID, she decided to take the final two exams – but not before exploring whether cognitive difficulties were the reason for her near misses. Upon receiving the results of an assessment, she had her suspicions confirmed that she was dyslexic. Nikki was granted extra time for her final two exams, but still found them to be stressful.

'I was able to apply to be given extra time in my final two ACCA exams, and those adjustments did help... but honestly, it was still a struggle. Also having to stay in the exam hall while my peers finished their exams, I was really so self-conscious about sticking out, and I know my son felt similar when sitting his exams at school. But it did help, and of course finally I got through and qualified, which I am so proud of.'

At work, the primary effect of her dyslexia now is not the quality of her work but the length of time it takes to complete tasks. Either she double-checks her work or she solicits someone else to review it. For instance, when constructing a policy, she sometimes repeats the same point due to different meanings in her mind, leading to an incoherent written document. Yet, notwithstanding Nikki's challenges with dyslexia, she also exhibits remarkable strengths and acknowledges that her skillset may not be 'typical' of an accountant, as she loves to pose unconventional questions and approach problem-solving innovatively.

'I think some of the struggles I have had with dyslexia have actually given me a real resilience when it comes to work now. Working in a hotel like the Ritz, its so fast-moving and ever-changing – the necessity to be able to respond whatever time of the day to a colleagues query or walking back in the door on a Monday to a weekend's worth of work. I actually love the diversity and intensity of the work.'

Being a line manager as someone who is neurodivergent also brings a different dimension in terms of expectations. Consequentially, she invests time teaching based on her own challenges and in turn her team have learned to break down tasks for her so she too can learn.

'I appreciate that everybody is different. I appreciate that not everybody is perfect. I appreciate that, you know, we all learn differently.'

Nikki is not alone at work. The Ritz London boasts a diverse workforce that embraces neurodiversity, and she finds herself encouraged by her colleagues to disclose more about her neurodiverse diagnosis. This courage to speak up has prompted others to share their own stories with her, and to embrace a culture of openness and psychological safety to share their stories, in addition to some of the formal training around neurodiversity that is available.

AS SOMEONE WHO IS NEURODIVERGENT BUT ALSO A LINE MANAGER ALSO BRINGS A DIFFERENT DIMENSION IN TERMS OF MANAGING EFFECTIVELY.

Listening to Nikki's story, whilst it is clear she has faced many challenges due to her dyslexia, she has met these with resilience and determination becoming the success she is today. Key to her success has been a workplace environment that fosters an atmosphere of understanding, patience and curiosity for employees, and a willingness to truly embrace neurodiversity.

'For me being confident to share my own experiences at work, as well as hearing some of the challenges my colleagues have faced too has been so important for my journey.'



Carving out a career to tax partner while masking her dyslexia



Susan Ball

Susan shares her journey from temporary role at HM Customs to tax partner and president of the Chartered Institute of Taxation – and how societal shifts have given her the courage to finally share the dyslexia diagnosis she received while at school.

SUSAN WAS ONLY THE FOURTH FEMALE TO HOLD THE ROLE OF PRESIDENT AT THE CHARTERED INSTITUTE OF TAXATION BUT ALSO WAS OPEN ABOUT HER NEURODIFFERENCE.

Susan's entry to the world of tax was unexpected, following what was supposed to be a gap year between school and university. A temporary job at HM Customs & Excise turned into an apprenticeship in tax at Inland Revenue. She then chose to specialise in employment-related taxes and built a career in this field. Susan may have almost inadvertently found a career path to follow but, unlike previous generations where there has usually been a longer tenure with one particular employer, she transitioned between various roles and firms, ending up in her current position as an employment tax partner at RSM.

'I found an area I was interested in. I found I was reasonably good at it. I found that I was fascinated by the law, how people got paid and the interaction with business operations. And so if you put all of those combinations of things together, you stay in that field.'

Susan has only recently started speaking about her dyslexia diagnosis, as her experience as a child with dyslexia was unfortunately very negative. Susan's parents sought out a

diagnosis after recognising she was having some challenges at school. This was undertaken independently of the school system as there was very limited support at this time. Towards the end of Susan's schooling, some support was finally offered but it would have meant placing her in a class below her academic ability. She decided to decline this as an option. This negative experience set the scene for a career where Susan would hide her dyslexia unless asked.

'I was told at school I was slow at reading, I couldn't spell, I couldn't string a list of numbers together, I was lazy, I should do better, why couldn't I memorise my times table when everyone else could do it?'

Susan does believe, however, that the detrimental impact and experiences of school ironically helped cultivate the resilience that became so valuable in her career journey later in life.

'Throughout my working life if people have asked me "are you dyslexic?", then I've said yes I am, but unless they asked me I didn't say... I wasn't very vocal about it... and part of that I think was a reflection of what happened at school... but the flipside is that when everyone's telling you that you can't do something from a young age, and then you find something you can do, something you are good at... well you focus all your efforts onto it. You can become quite single-minded about it.'

At the age of 30, Susan decided to seek out extra support counselling so she could talk to someone about her dyslexia to better understand it, the strengths it gave her, as well as some of the challenges it presented, and critically – what further support mechanisms she could put in place. Listening to Susan, it is clear she has in the most part had to navigate this journey in isolation, hiding her condition, but also learning quietly herself how she could turn the condition to her advantage. This constant need to mask meant she would seek out support from colleagues without necessarily explaining why.

‘If I was having a conversation with my line manager, having a conversation with my colleague, I would say to them things like, could you check this document for me for technical issues or spelling mistakes... without actually saying to them... “I want you to check it because I’m dyslexic.”’

Yet, with time, hiding her diagnosis from her colleagues and ‘masking’ took its toll on Susan. At times, she admits, she has been caught out, particularly when asked to do tasks that she could not do or would find extremely stressful – for example writing on the flipchart. Her self-taught strategies here were volunteering early for tasks that she could do, and in that way ensuring she was not asked to focus on tasks she might find more challenging.

‘One thing I would say is that we need to focus on the mental health aspects of masking, because I spent a huge amount of time hiding something. I expended a huge amount of energy on that. To the detriment of other things.’

MASKING A CONDITION CAN BE EXHAUSTING. HAVING TO SECOND GUESS SITUATIONS TO PRE-EMPT BEING PUT IN CHALLENGING SITUATIONS CAN BE VERY DRAINING.

Over the years, Susan has become confident in saying no to tasks she may have issues with and has learnt what her strengths are, manoeuvring herself into roles that play to those strengths. One of the huge learning points here for leaders in any organisation is the importance of team capabilities, and building teams that tap into the unique strengths that different people bring, especially for those who are neurodivergent. Susan sees this inclusivity as critical.

‘We’ve got to get to a position where it becomes the norm for people to have the conversation, well, I’m good at this, but I’m not so good at that. So can you help me with this? And, you know, maybe I’ll help you with that one.’

After years of not talking about her dyslexia, Susan decided to use her public stage as president of the Chartered Institute of Taxation to share her story. The main driver for this was helping others to feel brave enough to ask for the support she never had. What’s interesting is that Susan also admits that she felt she could be more open in her later career because she was at the point where she was well established and respected within her profession.

‘I felt I was in a position where I absolutely should share my story. Because if I didn’t talk about it, when I could talk about it, how can you expect anyone else to share their story too.’

I think one of the main reasons people don’t share their diagnosis is due to a fear of being judged or treated differently, and that to some extent comes from your own self confidence and your own view of where you are in life. Also there is still such a significant amount of misunderstanding surrounding neurodiversity so this a totally understandable fear. Are we suddenly finding that a lot more people are neurodiverse? No, I don’t think we are. I think people are just now more prepared to share their diagnosis. This has to be a good thing.’

The ripple effect of sharing a diagnosis, particularly if leaders in the organisation themselves are seen to do this, provides the psychologically safe place for others to share theirs, and to feel less alone and get the support they need. There is also likely to be a generational lens here too, with younger people coming into the workforce often being more open about sharing their diagnosis, having had help and support at school and university and seeking out organisational changes to better support them as neurodivergent employees.

THE RIPPLE EFFECT OF SHARING A DIAGNOSIS, PARTICULARLY IF LEADERS IN THE ORGANISATION THEMSELVES ARE SEEN TO DO THIS, PROVIDES THE PSYCHOLOGICALLY SAFE PLACE TO FOR OTHERS TO SHARE THEIRS.

But is this change happening fast enough?

Susan is optimistic about the future but believes organisations are on a journey and more needs to be done. She highlights a few areas of focus, including more inclusive recruitment processes, more education for line managers on neurodiversity, and a more lateral rethink of the basis for how we judge individuals to be suitable for promotion and progression.

‘If we’re all taught at a young age that people’s brains just work differently and therefore somebody will be good at that but may not be very good at something else, and that carries through life, then that has to be a good starting point. We just need to appreciate everyone is unique and everyone has something to bring.’

Tapping into the unique skills that an autism diagnosis may bring



Paolo Davighi

Paolo, diagnosed with autism later in life, also reflects on what organisations can do differently to make workplaces more neuro-inclusive, including parental support.

Paolo is an FCCA accountant with 34 years' experience preparing and auditing accounts in the public and private sector. For the last 21 years he has worked for HMRC in the UK across a variety of roles including, finance, tax and system implementation. He is currently leading a technical delivery team supporting the design and implementation of a new finance system. This role plays to Paolo's strengths, analysing accounting data, and liaising with finance staff across HMRC to understand how financial reporting can be improved, translating these requirements in a way IT colleagues will understand.

'I think about things in a very detailed way. It can take time to clear my head and get focused but then I am able to go into a deep analytical mode. I enjoy tasks which involve me analysing complicated information and systems, reviewing policies and guidance, and providing advice.'

Paolo was diagnosed with autism at the age of 51. Despite his diagnosis, he takes a pragmatic view on neurodiversity.

'Although neurodiversity is commonly perceived as a disability, I prefer the description that it is just like seeing things through a different lens which affects how an individual processes, learns and relays information. And of course it can bring unique skills and capabilities that are very valuable to employers.'

HMRC PROVIDE ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR EMPLOYEES WHO HAVE TO TAKE TIME OUT TO CARE FOR NEURODIVERGENT CHILDREN.

When he was first diagnosed, Paolo immediately shared this with his employer, who was very supportive. This started with a workplace assessment to understand what adjustments might help him day to day which were implemented quickly, such as coaching sessions, mind-mapping software, noise cancelling headphones, and recording all teams meeting that Paolo attended. The recording of teams meetings has had a wider benefit for the team, ensuring actions and key points are captured accurately. He also has access to a quiet area in the office where he can work undisturbed if required.

In addition to the adjustments, Paolo has received he also has access to support groups and chats for both his own experience but also his experience as a parent of child with autism. HMRC have introduced both an Autism Spectrum Support chat and the Parent/Carer Autism Spectrum Support Group chat, and Paolo is also a member of a cross-government autism employee support group. Specifically the UK Civil Service wide 'carer's passport' also provides additional support for employees with caring responsibilities. The use of a passport provides pre-agreed flexibility to take time out to care for his child.

'The requirements of neurodiverse individuals should be understood in more detail to enable a level playing field.'

Despite the low numbers of people with autism in employment he believes some progress is being made. Paolo gives examples of employability programmes such as EY Neuro-diverse Centres of Excellence and specialist recruitment agencies which provide support to autistic jobseekers. This is a key issue for Paolo, stressing that organisations need to radically rethink their recruitment practices, and create more effective entry routes to enable neurodivergent applicants to secure job roles.

'Many interview processes are still based on processes which potentially disadvantage many neurodivergent and particularly autistic people. I think we need to see more employers radically rethink the process – often employers assess an applicant's ability to do a certain job with their perceived sociability and personal engagement in an interview setting. Yet this approach may disadvantage certain candidates, particularly for autistic individuals who may have different social and communication skills.'

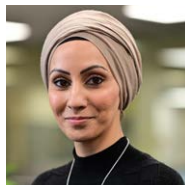
**THE LATEST OFFICE FOR NATIONAL
STATISTICS RESEARCH IN THE UK
SHOWS ONLY 29% OF PEOPLE
WITH AUTISM ARE IN ANY FORM
OF PAID EMPLOYMENT.**

Accessing these strengths needs a change in strategy in how organisations both recruit and retain those who are neurodivergent and while organisations are starting to make changes, a more focused effort is needed if they are truly going to be inclusive. Regardless of the current status quo, Paolo finds a reason to be positive.

'Whilst current employment statistics for autistic people are poor, I have seen improvements being implemented. It is essential that the level of investment in neurodiverse people continues to improve. I am more optimistic about employment practices in the future for neurodivergent employees.'



Evolving teaching practices to support the learning process for neurodivergent students



Hajra Babariya and Kate Coulson

Hajra, Director of Education Services at BPP, and Kate, Associate Dean for Assessment, explain how the teaching and learning approach is transforming through necessary adjustments to ensure better outcomes for neurodivergent learners.

AT BPP WE BELIEVE THAT EDUCATION IS FOR ALL. THEREFORE, UNDERSTANDING THE INDIVIDUAL NEEDS OF OUR STUDENTS IS IMPORTANT TO OUR MISSION.

Ensuring that our teaching and training is equitable and accessible to all is a responsibility we take very seriously, and our work sends a powerful message to our learners and stakeholders about our values and the type of world we want to operate within. We know that we can only understand the needs of neurodiverse students by working with them and co-creating an environment that caters for all. Therefore, co-creation with students is an important part of our approach as well as listening to our current and future students, ensuring that our staff understand neurodiversity, and we embed these values throughout all the work we undertake.

There are many implications when we reflect on teaching and learning for the neurodivergent community. From the perspective of individual students, we provide an education that is strengths based, flexible and utilises appropriate learning technologies. As an institution, the implications are more focused on staff awareness and sensitivity and inclusive teaching strategies as well as inclusive policies and Universal Design for Learning. We need to consider accommodations and modifications where appropriate but design-in these

attributes from the very start. Ultimately, the learning and teaching approach has long-term impact on students – workforce readiness is key here as well as self-advocacy skills and better long-term mental health outcomes – effective learning and teaching approaches have a profound impact on students while they are studying, but also this experience stays with them and can impact their entire lives.

EFFECTIVE LEARNING AND TEACHING APPROACHES HAVE A PROFOUND IMPACT ON STUDENTS WHILE THEY ARE STUDYING, BUT ALSO THIS EXPERIENCE STAYS WITH THEM AND CAN IMPACT THEIR ENTIRE LIVES.

There are a number of practical steps we have introduced to better support our neurodivergent students, particularly focused around reasonable adjustments at the outset of the learners' course. We will fund a learner's Educational Psychologist report where new evidence is required (learners who come to us with evidence from school age require a fresh report often at the cost of a few hundred pounds), and we see this makes a significant difference in reducing the barriers to accessing support. Students typically reach out to us to inform us of a learning support need and we work with them to produce their own Learning Support Agreement tailored to them which confirms any adjustments they need

to receive. Where applicable we also arrange specific one-to-one support for them such as study skills tutors or mental health mentors. Data on students who have declared the need for adjustments is then stored and shared with essential school and academic staff for their ongoing teaching and learning support. We have also introduced local contacts within the schools to create a smooth transition of service support, ensuring students have reasonable adjustments in place at a local level as well as for assessments.

Reflecting on the future, there is no doubt that teaching and learning will need to continue to evolve. Personalisation and choice are key drivers for the future of higher education and training, especially when applied to the neurodivergent

PERSONALISATION AND CHOICE ARE KEY DRIVERS FOR THE FUTURE OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING ESPECIALLY WHEN APPLIED TO THE NEURODIVERGENT COMMUNITY.

community. We already offer a huge amount of choice in terms of study mode and subject choice, but personalisation will be enhanced. Currently we provide personalised learning plans through our learning support team, but the concept of personalisation will become endemic to how we teach our students and how students learn throughout their compulsory education and beyond. Personalisation can be embedded through learning design provision (and co-created with students) but it can also be aided by generative AI and this is an area we are deeply committed to utilising in the future.



A global perspective on neurodiversity from India and Africa

India:

Corporate India is increasingly embracing neurodiversity in the workplace, hiring and supporting people with autism, dyslexia and ADHD. From partnering with NGOs to offering tailored training programmes, firms are hiring neurodivergent workers for roles in software development, data analysis and analytics, information development, UX design, cybersecurity, quality assurance and testing, and system administration, among others.

'Autism at work' program to offer tailored hiring and training:

SAP India's 'Autism at Work' Programme is dedicated to fostering a nurturing environment and showcasing the skills of individuals on the autism spectrum. This initiative focuses on hiring and supporting employees on the autism spectrum by providing tailored onboarding, training and career development opportunities.²

Train-Intern-Hire models: EY India has been hiring neurodiverse candidates through a structured process – where they are taken in as freshers, trained and groomed to take up roles in areas such as data leakage prevention. The organisation trains managers to support them while employees regularly go through certifications to upgrade skillsets.³

Wells Fargo's Neurodiversity Programme, which focuses on attracting talent from the broader spectrum of neurodiversity, onboarded 20 individuals in 2023 in technology, operations, and finance. The company uses a Train-Intern-Hire model. With the help of community partner EnAble India, Wells Fargo maps the market readiness and skills of candidates across the neurodiversity spectrum, and performs job role analysis to identify suitable roles internally.⁴

Networks to support neurodivergent individuals:

Publicis Sapient has developed programmes specifically geared towards supporting neurodivergent individuals and people with intellectual disability. It has amplified efforts around supporting them by engaging all its geo circles (where it connects remote people in different cities to build local communities and encourage collaboration) in disability confidence panel discussions.⁵

Additional support through technology, medical insurance programmes and flexi-work arrangements:

Accenture India's medical insurance programme covers treatment costs for prolonged speech therapy and motor skills development for people on the neurodiversity spectrum and their dependents.⁶

Infosys has initiated programmes that focus on creating supportive work environments for neurodiverse employees. This includes offering flexible work arrangements, providing noise-canceling headphones, and establishing mentorship programmes. Infosys also collaborates with specialist organisations to continually improve their support systems and training for neurodiversity inclusion.⁷

Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) has integrated neurodiversity into its broader diversity and inclusion strategy. They focus on creating accessible recruitment processes, offering internships and training programmes for neurodiverse individuals, and making workplace accommodations such as flexible hours and sensory-friendly spaces. TCS also provides awareness training for all employees to foster a more inclusive workplace culture.⁸

² World Economic Forum

³ <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/jobs/hr-policies-trends/india-inc-embracing-neurodiversity-at-workplace/articleshow/109275299.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ <<https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/company/corporate-trends/india-inc-supports-employees-with-special-needs-children/articleshow/100480123.cms?from=mdr>>

⁷ <<https://www.infosys.com/about/diversity-inclusion/people-disabilities.html>>

⁸ <<https://www.tcs.com/who-we-are/diversity-equity-inclusion/dei-framework-neurodiversity-gender-race-inclusion>>



Africa:

Tailored hiring and training programmes for neurodivergent individuals:

Similar to India, SAP Africa has also been running an 'Autism at Work' programme since 2013 to support candidates who fall into the various neurodiverse categories. Candidates are encouraged to apply to open roles of interest for which they are qualified. Managers with open positions can then contact the Autism at Work local lead in their country to connect with candidates in the programme pipeline. Hiring opportunities are promoted through the local partner network in addition to traditional recruiting channels.⁹

Microsoft (including the South Africa office) has implemented a Neurodiversity Hiring Programme that focuses on recruiting individuals with autism and other neurodiverse conditions. The programme includes a multi-week academy that provides candidates with the opportunity to showcase their skills in a supportive environment, rather than through traditional interview processes. This initiative also involves continuous support and mentorship for neurodiverse employees to help them thrive in their roles.¹⁰

Resource groups and flexible-working arrangements to support neurodivergent individuals:

Safaricom, a Kenyan telecommunications company, established employee resource groups specifically for neurodiverse staff – providing platforms for sharing experiences and advocating for necessary accommodations. They have also implemented flexible work arrangements and created quiet zones within their offices to reduce sensory overload (Franklin Fitch).

Since 2018, Safaricom has increased its percentage of employees who are people with disability from 1.7% (95) to the current 2.5% (140), with a target of reaching 5% by the year 2025. Safaricom partnered with the National Industrial Training Authority (NITA), Sightsavers and Cisco to equip people with disabilities with digital skills through training and internship opportunities.¹¹

Using technology solutions to better support neurodiverse employees:

Standard Bank has integrated various technology solutions to create an inclusive environment for neurodiverse employees. They have implemented text-to-speech software, noise-canceling headphones, and personalised workspaces to accommodate sensory sensitivities and minimise distractions.¹²

EY has established neurodiversity centres of excellence that also benefit its African branches. These centres leverage the talents of neurodiverse individuals by providing them with technology tools and support systems tailored to their needs. This includes customised onboarding processes and the use of assistive technology to facilitate better communication and task management.¹³

These examples highlight a growing recognition of the value neurodiverse employees bring to the workplace.

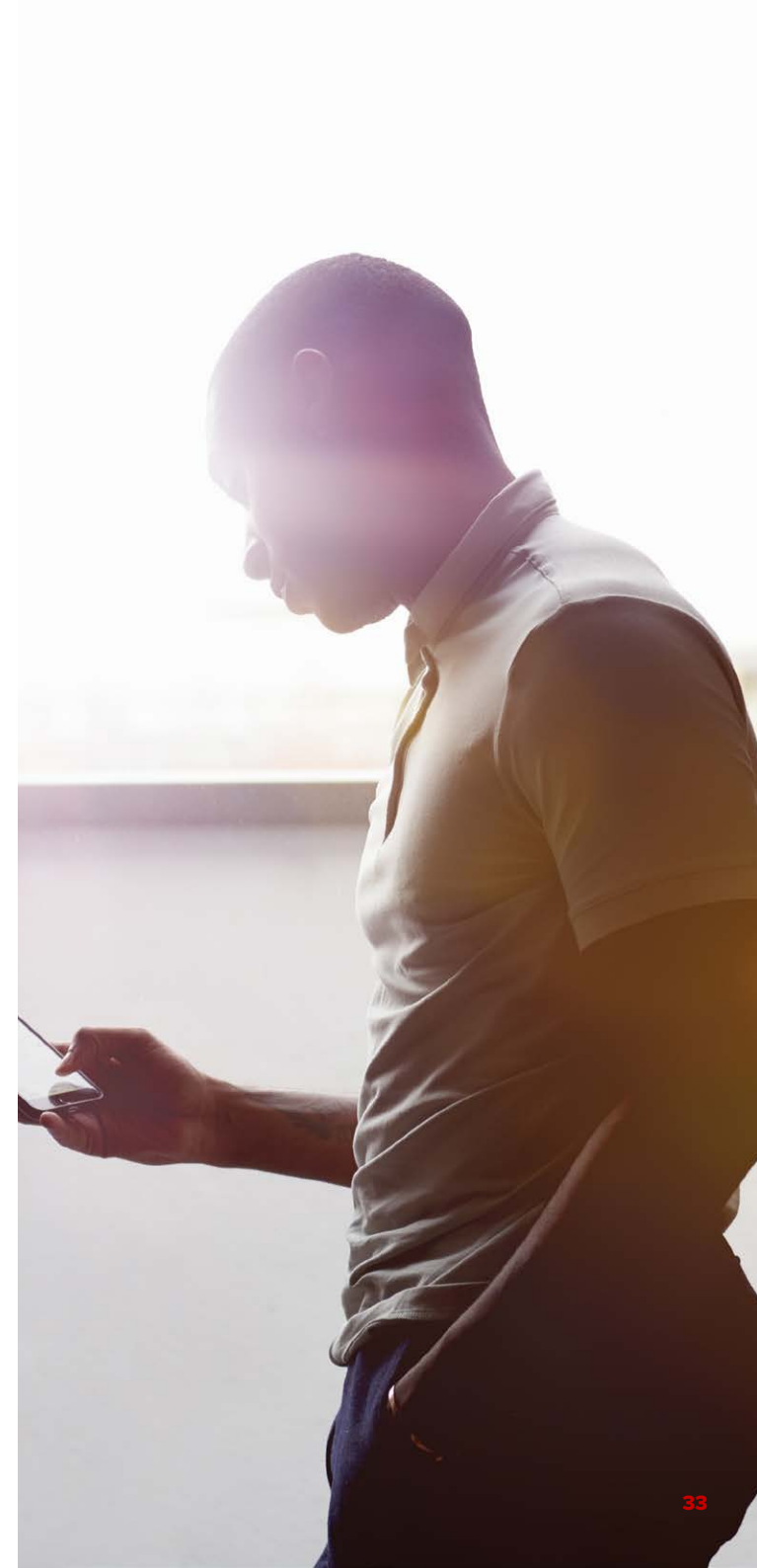
9 <<https://news.sap.com/africa/2024/03/transparency-empathy-key-to-supporting-neurodiversity-in-the-workplace/>>

10 <<https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/diversity/inside-microsoft/cross-disability/neurodiversityhiring>>

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Allyship

How can neuromajority peers empower neurodiverse talent?

Being an ally involves supporting, understanding and championing those outside of their community. Those in the neuromajority have a role to play in providing those who are neurodivergent with a psychological safe environment where they can openly share their challenges and get the support they need. Allies also can speak out against misrepresentation, and model inclusive behaviours and language.

Five steps to being a good Neurodiversity ally:



#1 Normalise neurodiversity

Create environments where people feel free to openly share their understanding of neurodiversity. Speak to colleagues about what you are learning. Implement solutions within your team that consider all types of thinking styles.



#2 Believe

It takes courage to speak up when struggling. If someone shares their challenges, believe them. Sometimes what may be perceived as the simplest task, can be difficult.



#3 Focus on strengths

Those who are neurodivergent, are frequently told what they cannot do. When speaking to someone who is neurodivergent, remind them of their strengths and what they can do. Where possible provide work opportunities that align to these strengths to help build confidence.



#4 No judgement

Everyone has a preconception of what ADHD, autism, dyslexic etc is and people can unintentionally project that view onto a person. As an ally, your role is to listen and not judge based on this preconception.



#5 Be curious

If someone has had the courage to share – listen. Ask questions. Do not be afraid to get it wrong. It is much better to have the conversation than to not have the conversation.

EXPLORE: A guide for employers – better support for neurodivergent employees



Tania Martin,
Neuro-inclusion Consultant, Trainer and Speaker,
PegSquared (view full bio [here](#))





A guide for employers

Better support for neurodivergent employees

Supporting neurodivergent employees is essential for creating an inclusive workplace and does not need to be complex. Often knowing where to start can be the biggest challenge.

Organisations can approach neuro-inclusion at both an organisational and individual level. At the organisational level, the focus is on creating an environment where all can belong, where there is a clear direction on neuro-inclusion, and where policies and processes consider neuro-inclusion in their development. At an individual level, this means a focus on the specific support an individual requires. The north star for an organisation should be neuro-inclusive design – where possible adjustments and ways of working are part of standard practice and no longer need to be requested.

THE NORTH STAR FOR AN ORGANISATION SHOULD BE NEURO-INCLUSIVE DESIGN – WHERE POSSIBLE ADJUSTMENTS AND WAYS OF WORKING ARE PART OF STANDARD PRACTICE AND NO LONGER NEED TO BE REQUESTED.

ORGANISATION LEVEL SUPPORT

#1 Get leadership buy in and sponsorship

Leadership plays an important role in creating neuro-inclusive environments. The tone from the top, both in behaviour and support for a neurodiversity strategy, helps create a psychologically safe environment where all can thrive.

Leadership also can allocate resources to implement strategy and investment to acquire external expertise for training, audit processes and supporting individuals. Getting leadership's sponsorship is imperative if lasting change is to be embedded within an organisation to support those who are neurodivergent.

#2 Provide education and training opportunities to build awareness

Education is key. Raising awareness and providing training is important to ensure there is understanding of what neurodiversity means for all within an organisation.

Organisations need to be clear on key messages and highlight the benefits of a neurodiverse workforce. Training should challenge stereotypes and common misconceptions about neurodiversity, and change the narrative to focus on the strengths that those who are neurodivergent can bring to organisations. As well as awareness training, specific training should also be considered for line managers and HR/talent teams.

#3 Ensure inclusive recruitment practices

The recruitment processes can be the biggest barrier to those who are neurodivergent securing employment. Employers should consider a skills-based approach and a move away from traditional interview-based recruitment practices.

When recruiting, employers should consider a skills-based approach – what skills are required for the role and what skills exist within the team already? An awareness of team strengths, especially when related to 'softer' competency skills, may mean that hiring managers do not require someone to 'tick every box'. For example, if there is an individual in the team who excels at presenting, does the new recruit have to be an exceptional presenter too? By approaching recruitment in this way, an organisation can start to attract more neurodivergent employees.

Employers should consider a recruitment process that aims to capture the specific skills that neurodivergent individuals may bring. Consider the use of work simulations and technical tests, a movement away from traditional interview-based recruitment, and provide questions ahead of interviews to help aid preparation. Reassess old biases that interviewers may have – are they still looking for eye contact, clear and concise communication, a firm handshake – all attributes that may make it much less likely for a neurodivergent interviewee to be successful in the process.

**REASSESS OLD BIASES
INTERVIEWERS MAY HAVE –
ARE THEY STILL LOOKING FOR
EYE CONTACT, CLEAR AND
CONCISE COMMUNICATION, A FIRM
HANDSHAKE – ALL ATTRIBUTES THAT
MAY MAKE IT MUCH LESS LIKELY FOR
A NEURODIVERGENT INTERVIEWEE
TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN THE PROCESS.**

#4 Ensure job descriptions are inclusive

Job descriptions need to be inclusive. Organisations should consider how they reflect their neuro-inclusive culture – simplify job descriptions where possible, use clear and inclusive language, and adopt a variety of communication formats.

- They should reflect an organisation's inclusive practice through **language used** and **demonstrate acceptance** of those who are neurodivergent. This could include a paragraph about the organisation's inclusive culture. Career websites should also reflect this – the use of stories of current employees, including leadership stories, are very powerful ways of demonstrating an organisation's ability to create a sense of belonging and acceptance for those who are neurodivergent.
- They should differentiate between **'required'** and **'preferred'** skills for the role. Highlight which skills, including softer competency skills, are essential and which skills are useful but not necessary. If possible, for qualifications/technical skill sets, give optionality such as 'two or more of the following skills', thereby attracting a wider range of candidates to the role.
- They should use **language that is clear**. Avoid terms such as a 'great team player' or 'excellent communication skills' that are vague and open to interpretation.
- They should **simplify the job description** as much as possible – job descriptions tend to include a lot of content – what content is necessary for a person to decide whether a role is right for them?
- They should consider **alternative communication formats** – not everybody likes to read a lot of text, could a short video or infographic be included to provide information? Job descriptions and career sites should be accessible.
- They should offer **adjustments to the process**. Good practice can include providing examples of what others have been provided previously.

#5 Establish employee resource groups and communities

Organisations should consider establishing resource groups or communities supported by senior sponsorship that provide safe spaces for those within the organisation to ask questions and provide support for others.

In demonstrating their inclusivity credentials, employers should seek to develop dedicated resource groups which provide a shared platform for employees to come together to share their neurodiversity experiences. Resources can include a wide range of interventions, from information-sharing exercises through to external speaker invitations, or educational opportunities. These help provide greater assurance to neurodivergent employees of the organisations intent for support, as well as helping building knowledge and awareness across the workforce.

#6 Build brand visibility in the neurodiversity space

Visible support for the neurodiversity agenda in the external marketplace showcases the organisation's commitment to the issue and will likely impact recruitment positively.

Ensuring the organisations support for neurodiversity is recognised externally is important, because it sends key messaging to people outside of the organisation that inclusivity is a core part of the employee value proposition. From celebrating key calendar dates such as World Autism Awareness Day, or Neurodiversity Celebration Week, through to charitable initiatives and advocacy opportunities, building the brand story around neurodiversity helps communicate positive messages to internal stakeholders such as employees, as well as external stakeholders such as customers, and other influential groups.

#7 Develop clear policies to enable employee support

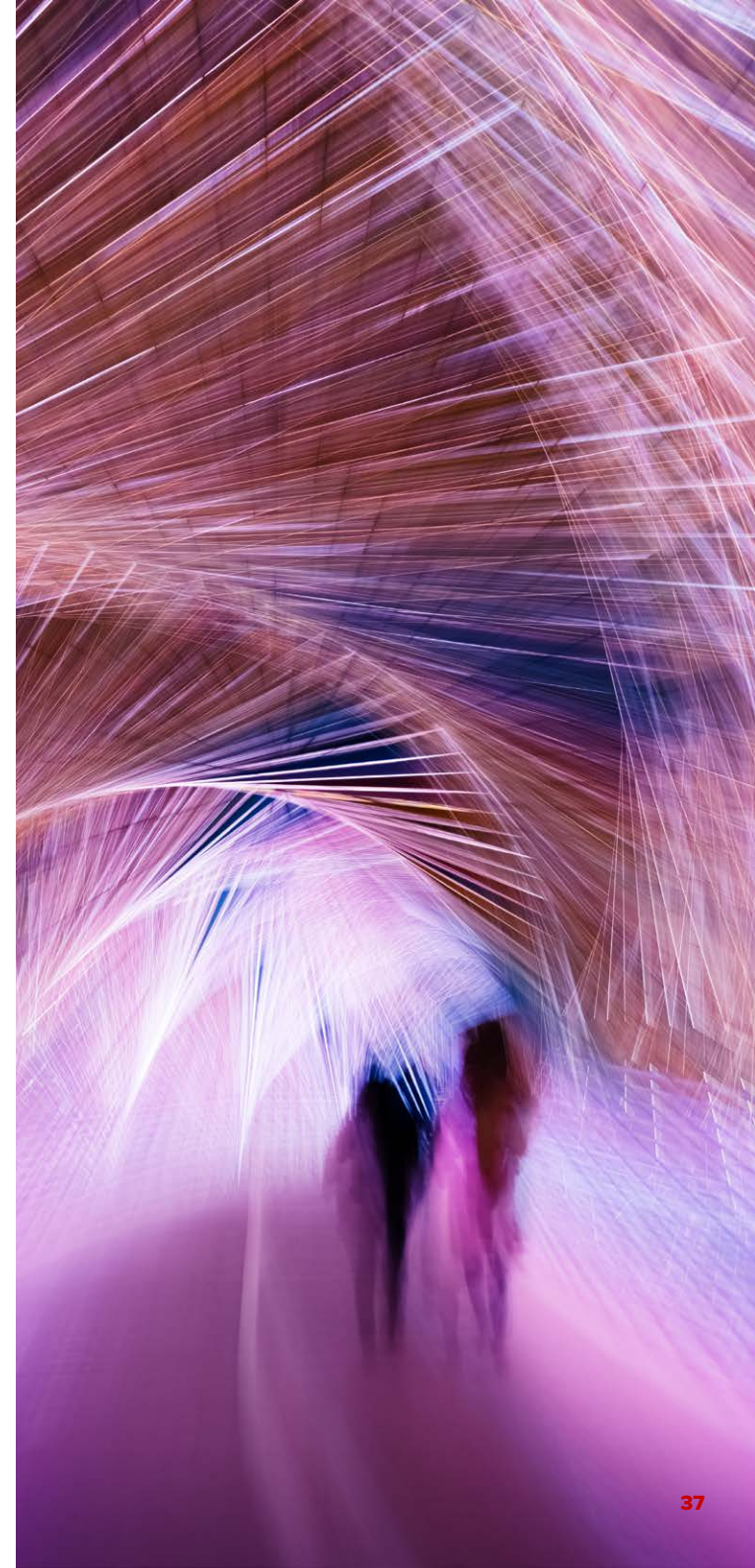
Providing clear organisation policies in relation to neurodivergent employees and the support that can be provided is vital. These provide a framework for all employees in understanding the organisation's position in relation to neurodiversity, as well as a roadmap for actions that may need to take place.

It is important that organisations have clear policies in place to support their neurodivergent employee workforce, as well as providing other members of the workforce with relevant guidelines on the support that can be made available. Policies should be provided in clear and accessible language with relevant definitions and may cover a number of different areas such as an organisations legal duties, how to disclose and access support including adjustments, managerial guidance, and the resources available.

#8 Create neurodiversity champions, and reverse mentoring programmes

Identifying champions across the organisation that can advocate for inclusive neurodiverse practices can benefit all employees.

Whether creating roles specifically targeted at the neurodivergent employee community, or roles which are more broadly positioned under the diversity and inclusivity banner, having advocates within the organisation who can champion the agenda, be a source for knowledge sharing, and act as a potential 'go-to' point both for the neurodivergent individual, as well as the broader workforce, can be another way in which employers can strengthen the support provided. Some organisations may also wish to explore opportunities around reverse mentoring where neurodivergent employees provide upwards mentoring for leaders and managers who would like to understand more about neurodiversity.



INDIVIDUAL LEVEL SUPPORT

#1 Reasonable adjustments

Reasonable adjustments are the adjustments made by employers to ensure all of their employees are not substantially disadvantaged when performing their roles.

In some jurisdictions such as the UK, it is a legal requirement for employers to make reasonable adjustments for those who are neurodivergent, and these should be provided throughout the employee life cycle from recruitment through to leaving an organisation. Providing reasonable adjustments for those who are neurodivergent does not need to be complicated or expensive.

Adjustments may vary depending on where a person is in their career and the external stressors in their life, and therefore need to be fluid. Ongoing communication and trust between employee and line manager is important to ensure that the

adjustments in place are still useful. For some individuals, it is helpful to have a toolkit of strategies that can support them, so that they can take a different approach if the efficacy of some interventions are falling. Broadly there are three main areas to consider when implementing reasonable adjustments: technology, the physical environment and ways of working.

1. Technology

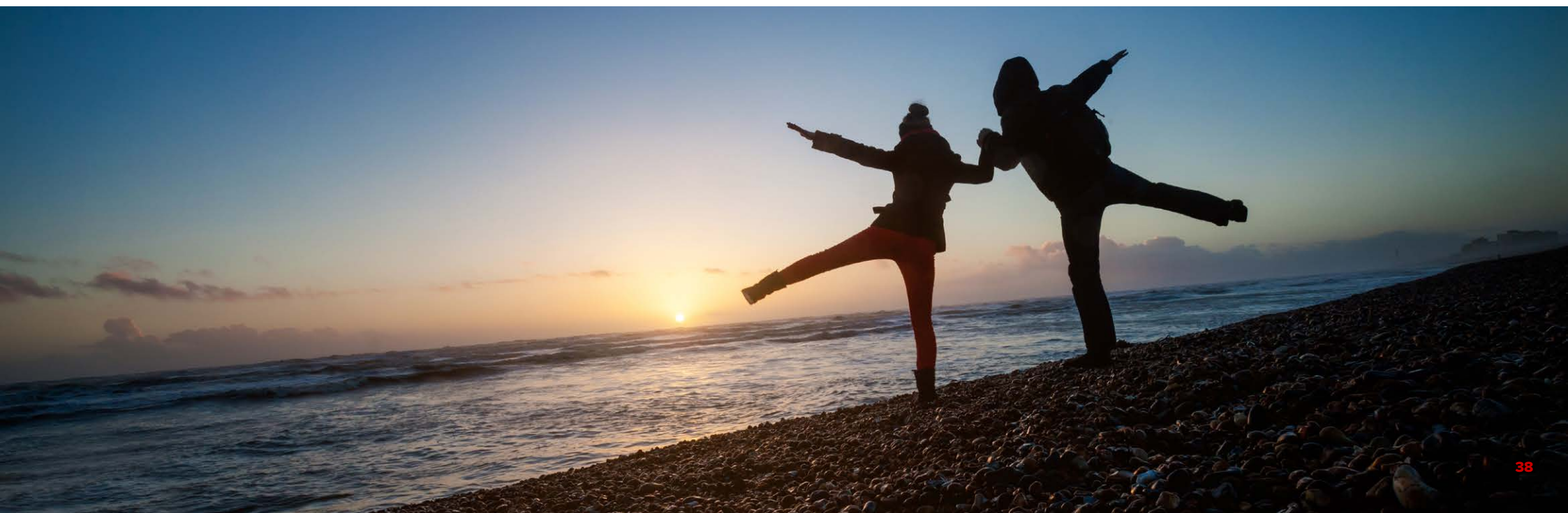
An organisation can provide additional assistive technologies such as screen readers and speech recognition software and associated training to help neurodivergent employees use different technologies.

The use of artificial intelligence (AI) is becoming more popular as an adjustment for those who are neurodivergent. For example, using AI to make notes during meetings and provide summaries and action points; using AI to help

overcome writing challenges by suggesting word choices and sentence fluency; and using AI that creates mind maps and helps organise information. Additionally, AI technologies are also being developed to provide coaching, reduce cognitive overload, and bridge language barriers. Use of simpler technology, including timers, calendars, digital to do lists, notifications and reminders, can also potentially be useful for those who are neurodivergent.

2. Physical environment

The office space can have a significant impact on someone who is neurodivergent and thinking differently about how the space is used and navigated can enhance an individual's wellbeing and productivity. See the case study provided to explore this in more detail.



**SPOTLIGHT ON:****NEUROINCLUSIVE WORKPLACE OFFICE DESIGN – THE NEXT FRONTIER IN BETTER SUPPORTING NEURODIVERGENT EMPLOYEES**

Public awareness of neurodivergence has been increasing in recent years, but while designing the built environment for people with physical, visual and auditory disabilities is well understood, there is currently little consideration for those with specific neurodivergent challenges.

From the perspective of the employer, with an estimated 15-20% of the population being considered to have a neurodivergent condition, it is important to consider the diverse needs of their workforce when designing future office spaces. Understanding and addressing these needs not only fosters an inclusive work environment but also enhances productivity and well-being for all employees.

Neurodivergent individuals often experience sensory sensitivities and cognitive processing differences that can make traditional office environments very challenging, or even overwhelming. Employers and designers should therefore consider how to mitigate sensory overload and create easily understandable and predictable office environments.

Open-plan offices, while popular, can be overwhelming due to constant visual and auditory distractions. Employers should look to provide a variety of workspaces, including semi-private offices, quiet rooms and low-stimulation areas where employees can retreat to concentrate or decompress.

ACOUSTICS ARE ARGUABLY THE MOST IMPORTANT AND OVERLOOKED ASPECT OF ANY INTERNAL BUILT ENVIRONMENT FOR NEURODIVERGENT INDIVIDUALS.

Acoustics are arguably the most important and often overlooked aspect of any internal built environment for neurodivergent individuals. Controlling significant sources of unwanted or unexpected sound, and reducing acoustic

reverberation time, can significantly reduce distraction, anxiety and stress. Simple additions such as sound-absorbing materials, carpets, acoustic panels, acoustic ceilings and quiet zones can help create a calmer and more focused workspace.

The use of clear and consistent signage can greatly assist with wayfinding within the office environment. This includes clear labels for rooms, straightforward wayfinding systems and the use of symbols and colours to denote different areas. Consistency in the layout and design of the workspace can also reduce anxiety and confusion, making the office more navigable and predictable.

Complex or abstract patterns and strong or clashing colours in office design should be avoided because they can be visually overstimulating and distracting. A calmer, more predictable visual environment with more muted tones and simple patterns can help create a more comfortable and supportive workspace.

Careful selection of lighting utilising a warmer white light output, avoiding an excessive number of light sources and the avoidance of fluorescent lights can all contribute to reducing sensory overload. Natural indirect lighting and adjustable lighting options are preferred to create a more calming and sensory-flexible space.

Neuroinclusive design should also extend to communal areas such as kitchens, restrooms, and breakout areas. These spaces should be calming and inviting with consideration given to sensory sensitivities. Using neutral colours and maintaining a clutter-free environment can create a more pleasant and accommodating space.

Designing office spaces that accommodate neurodivergent individuals requires a thoughtful and comprehensive approach. Unfortunately, there is currently a lack of awareness of how to design for people with neurodivergence, compounded by the lack of statutory legislation. To help alleviate this situation, it is important to consider [new design standards such as PAS6463, from the British Standards Institute in the UK](#), and to establish neuroinclusive design from the outset of a project by building a design team with experience in designing for neurodivergence.

By considering the design of the work environment to be more inclusive of those with neurodivergence, this helps meet both legal and ethical obligations regarding equality and promotes inclusivity. This not only enhances the well-being and productivity of neurodivergent and neurotypical employees, but also contributes to greater social inclusion and a more dynamic and innovative workplace for all.

James Pass – Lead Architect & Divisional Director at E3 Cube. Specialist in design for neurodivergent conditions and compliance.

3. Ways of working

For many individuals who are neurodivergent, simple ways of working adjustments can have the most significant impact on their ability to be productive in the workplace.

Flexible working arrangements can help support an individual who is neurodivergent. Consider both the number of hours worked and when the employee works. Can an allowance be made for an individual to come into the office later to miss the intensity of public transport during rush hour? Is it possible to work from home more?

In relation to how a person works, many challenges experienced by those who are neurodivergent relate to ways of working that most take for granted, such as: organisational skills, time management, verbal communication, spelling and taking notes, and concentration. These are not skills for which an individual simply requires training – the brain of a neurodivergent person may not be 'wired' to be able to complete these tasks without some support. Simple strategies across these areas can be implemented within teams – and needs will differ by person, but some examples of adjustments are given below.

- **Organisational skills** – the line manager provides clear deadlines and helps an individual break down a complex project into smaller steps and sets mini deadlines to keep the employee on track.
- **Time management** – time blocking of calendars can allow for focus time so that an individual does not have to transition between tasks and can concentrate on a single task.
- **Verbal communication** – consider the language used. Using literal language can be confusing. Be clear about what is being asked and provide context.
- **Spelling and taking notes** – the line manager or a team member can help by proofreading written reports and important emails.
- **Concentration** – using fidget toys during meetings or music or noise-cancelling headphones while working on a task can help the employee stay focused.

Whilst line managers have a role to play working with the individual day to day, organisations may also want to consider additional mentoring and neurodiversity specific coaching programmes to help those who are neurodivergent identify support strategies, as well as provide career support.



SPOTLIGHT ON: LEVERAGING THE SUPPORT OF NEURODIVERSITY EXPERTISE

With an increased focus on neurodiversity and in those sharing their neurotype with employers, it is good practice to leverage external expertise to help implement good practice across an organisation. This can be at an individual level and organisational level, and can include strategy and policy development; employee lifecycle process reviews including recruitment audits; awareness and education; workplace adjustments (including coaching) and conflict resolution.

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