



## **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-INCLUSION 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.

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### #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**

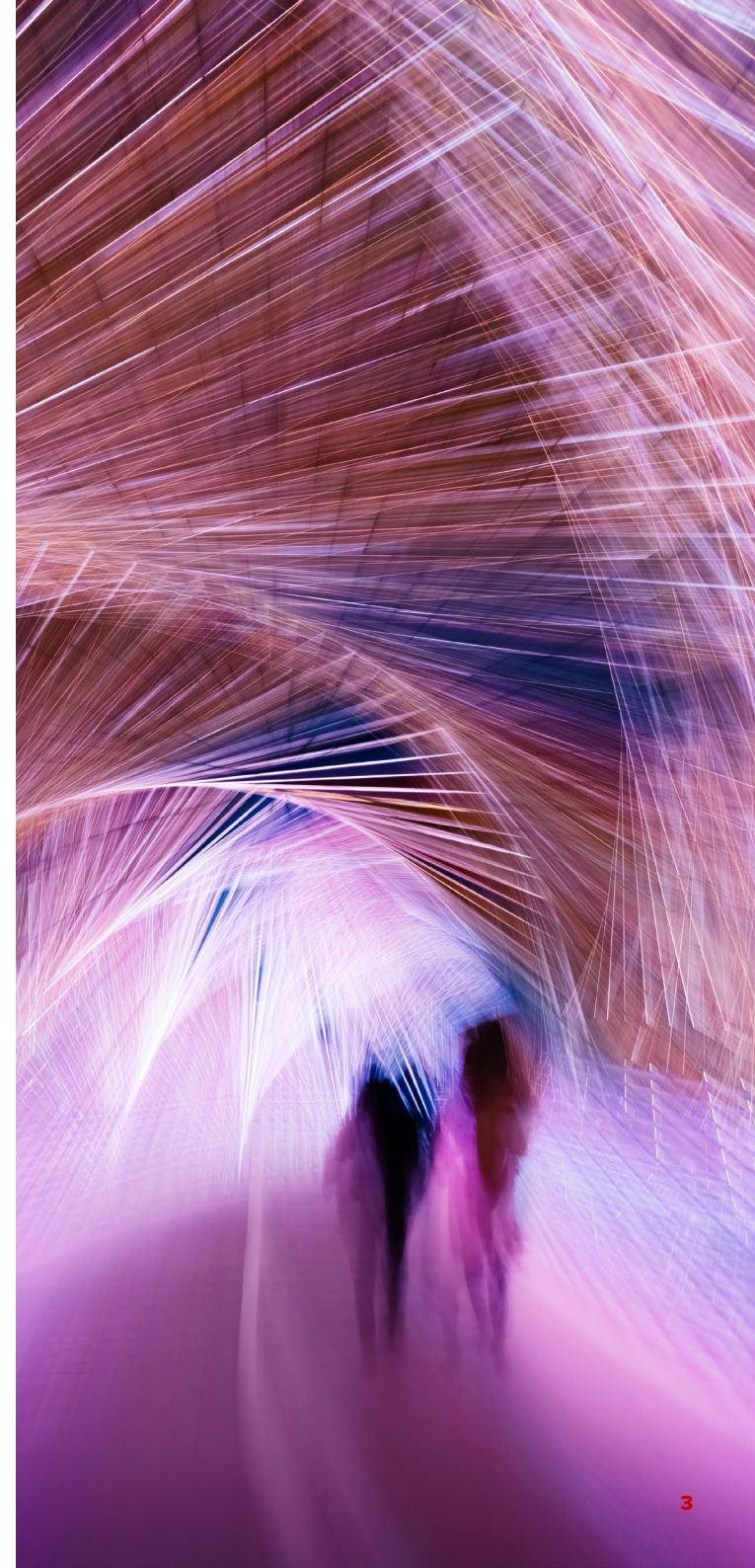
**Providing clear organisation policies in relation to neurodivergent employees and the support that can be provided is vital. These provide a framework for all employees in understanding the organisation's position in relation to neurodiversity, as well as a roadmap for actions that may need to take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

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### #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.