

# HOW TO CREATE A NEURODIVERGENT INCLUSIVE WORKPLACE

**SIMPLE ADJUSTMENTS YOU  
CAN IMPLEMENT TODAY**

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**Neuro Advantage**

Having dealt with the challenge of how to recruit neurodivergent candidates and on-board them into your business, you're now considering the next steps as part of your diversity and inclusion plans.

Or you may be in the camp where you have identified existing staff who have disclosed as being neurodivergent or are facing 'stereotypical' workplace challenges.

Making reasonable adjustments to the workplace are often mandatory legislative requirements in most countries. But beyond that, having an inclusive workplace that caters for the needs of your staff will allow them to perform at their best.

Ultimately, having happy and productive staff will lead to having happy customers and a thriving business. This is the concept known as the Service Profit Chain.

## **Areas of Adjustment**

In any business or organisation, there are three main areas of consideration when it comes to making adjustments.

- The environment
- Processes and practices
- Communications

Let's explore each of these in turn and look at some of the practical changes that you may wish to consider. We'll also cover the 'why' for making changes and how individuals may be personally affected.

## **The Environment**

When we talk about the environment, we are talking about the physical workplace environment. This will cover aspects such as lighting, sound, smells, temperature. But can also include availability and access to different workspaces or rooms as well as decoration or decor of rooms.

In simple terms, managing the physical environment is about managing sensory inputs. For many neurodivergent people, they can be sensitive to sensory overload. And this could be across any of the 5 senses.

## **Noise and Light**

Having options for workspaces that allow individuals to regulate their exposure to noise and/or lighting (often fluorescent) for example can significantly reduce anxiety, stress and workplace exhaustion.

- This could be as simple as providing access to a quiet room that has independent lighting (that can be turned off).
- Utilising natural light as much as possible, with blinds used to limit glare and potential visual distractions.
- Being able to provide a work area that is removed or more distant from noisy machinery or office equipment such as printers and copiers.

## **Decorations/Decor**

- Avoiding use of brightly coloured wall art or busy visual displays which can be highly distracting or lead to sensory overload.
- Be aware that for some people, ceiling fans can become visually distracting and depending on the circumstances, should be considered when determining work station placement.

## Processes and Practices

To some extent, there may be overlap with communication when it comes to looking at your processes and practices.

An individual's processing time and learning style will be relevant when thinking about the common processes and practices that exist within your organisation. From the expectations on how they are to complete their job to the informal practices around lunch times, team meetings or after work social activities.

Understanding that not everyone will learn internal processes at the same pace and may benefit from alternative approaches to explaining information is important.

Some other examples of simple, process related adjustments might be:

- Providing flexible working arrangements, such as altered start and/or end times. Reduced hours, or days. It could even include understanding that some days, staff may not be in the head space to come to work and be effective. Allowing time for them to manage their mental health and well being will allow them to be far more productive and engaged when they do come to work.
- Altering job duties, splitting work across multiple people where you can allocate people the work tasks that they are going to be able to perform the best. Otherwise known as a Job Carve, this is about pushing work to where the best results can be achieved.
- Making allowances for alternative ways of working, such as the use of headphones, wearing a hat inside (to reduce glare from lights) or even having the ability to take regular breaks to include movement in their working rhythm.

## **Performance Management**

Equally, processes such as performance management and how you conduct performance reviews will be important. For many neurodivergent people, frequent, informal yet clear feedback is an important part of supporting their ongoing development.

Waiting for an annual review process can often leave people unsure of whether they are meeting expectations and anxious about their job performance. For neurodivergent staff this can result in them doubting their own abilities, second-guessing a manager's comments and actions and lead to increased anxiety and lower job performance.

## **Workflow**

Take some time to review expectations around the flow of work and how tasks may be handed off to other teams. Ensuring that people upstream and downstream have some appreciation of any changes to the way in which a neurodivergent person may be completing their role will help with reducing confusion, misconceptions and keep things moving along the way you intended.

## **Team Meetings and Gatherings**

Provide context early on to your neurodivergent staff member for any regular or frequent team meetings that you run. Appreciating the relevance of those meetings to their role and any explicit expectations on them regarding providing inputs can help reduce confusion and potential anxiety.

Be mindful that the social elements of team meetings along with the potential noise, movement and activity associated with them can be both daunting and overstimulating for some people. Provide an avenue for them to tactfully and discreetly remove themselves should the need arise.

## **Communication**

In reality, communication is a whole topic in itself, so we'll only be covering some high level themes here.

Many of the challenges people experience at work come down to issues with communication. Whether it is misunderstanding or misinterpretation or a lack of communication due to insufficient trust and confidence.

I would always urge any manager, recruiter or Human Resources representative to proactively ask what they can do to support the neurodivergent team member to be comfortable at work and therefore allow them to be successful.

Keep in mind that this is not necessarily a one time conversation either. It should be something that is addressed on a regular basis. Individual circumstances change, self-awareness can increase and a deeper appreciation of the nuances of the specific workplace can be gained. All of these may lead to changes to adjustments required.

As can happen with anyone, personal circumstances can be fluid. Issues outside of work can arise, sometimes at short notice or unexpectedly which may impact an employee at work. Being aware that anxiety, depression or exhaustion for example may come and go in terms of their impact on daily functioning and being prepared to support those conversations and your staff through those times is important.

Allowing for some downtime or the ability to work from home where staff can potentially better regulate their environment and their sensory inputs can have a tangible impact on how effective they can be in their work.

This level of support and understanding is challenging to deliver on without frequent, open and non-judgmental communication.

## **Formats and Styles**

Some people are highly visual learners, whereas others appreciate clear written instructions. Finding out the communication and learning preferences of your staff will allow you to ensure that information is communicated to them in the most effective format.

When giving instructions, leverage different formats to help increase the 'stickiness' and provide time and space for processing the expectations.

Don't assume that just because you verbally told someone what is expected, that they understand. Follow up with the instructions in writing (or flip it and email first and follow up with a personal check in to confirm). Provide time between touch points for them to consider the ask and formulate questions.

I have a client who's default response to nearly every ask is 'no'. Unless there is a clear and direct path to completing the work as described that they can see, it's just 'no'. However, once they've then had some time to consider and think through a range of alternatives they will invariably turn around the work well within the time required and often better than expected as they discover a new insight along the way.

## The Wrap

Creating a neurodivergent inclusive workplace is something that any organisation can do. Many of the adjustments you might make to the way you approach setting up workspaces, communicating with staff and managing processes will more often than not also benefit a wide range of employees. Not just those that happen to be neurodiverse.

What can you do to make your workplace more inclusive today?

If you'd like to discuss your inclusion and support needs, reach out and set up a time with us.



**Book a call**

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