



Neurodiversity in the Workplace

Embracing cognitive differences
to build an inclusive culture



Written for UKG by Parris Consulting

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Introduction

Diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEI&B) initiatives have never been more visible. Awareness of the value of diversity is greater than ever, and organizations are striving to become more inclusive and equitable. In addition to publicizing their commitment to DEI&B, they're providing training to employees, managers, and leadership on what it means to be an equitable organization — and the practical things we can all do to foster a sense of belonging.

This progress is possible because organizations have gone through a reckoning regarding race, gender, sexual orientation, age, and disability status. They now realize it's impossible to ignore these identity characteristics, particularly when they intersect and contribute to oppression.

The University of Connecticut's Center for Neurodiversity and Employment Innovation found that unemployment for neurodivergent adults runs at least as high as 30-40%, which is three times the rate for people with a disability, and eight times the rate for people without a disability.¹

As a movement, DEI&B is lagging when it comes to including all underrepresented identities — especially neurodiversity. As a result, organizations have been slow to understand what neurodiversity is and what its implications are for job seekers, candidates, and employees. Only recently have employers started to think about what it's like for neurodivergent individuals to navigate the workplace — and to consider how to support them.

This guide discusses the employee journey from the perspective of neurodiversity. It explores the benefits of hiring and nurturing neurodivergent employees — and how to do so successfully.

“Neurodiversity may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general.”

— Harvey Blume, *The Atlantic*

What Is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity refers to natural variations in neurological function among people. It encompasses a broad range of conditions. Whether these differences are apparent to others depends on the type of condition, the degree of severity, and how well it's managed.

Neurodiversity does not mean limitation. On the contrary, many highly successful people with neurodivergent conditions have reached the heights of their careers.

Here are some examples of neurodivergent conditions you may encounter among job seekers, candidates, and employees at your workplace.

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a disorder characterized by difficulty paying attention, restlessness, and impulsivity. Symptoms begin in childhood and may be flagged because they impair academic performance. Some adults lose ADHD symptoms as they mature, but others continue to experience challenges in their daily functioning.

In the workplace, ADHD can get in the way of managing tasks. But there are solutions, including frequent breaks, thoughtfully paced tasks, and realistic workloads. There are also tools and technology that can help remind employees of tasks and prevent interruptions.

You may have encountered the term attention deficit disorder (ADD). However, this term is no longer used, as ADD and ADHD are considered subsets of the same condition.

Anxiety disorder

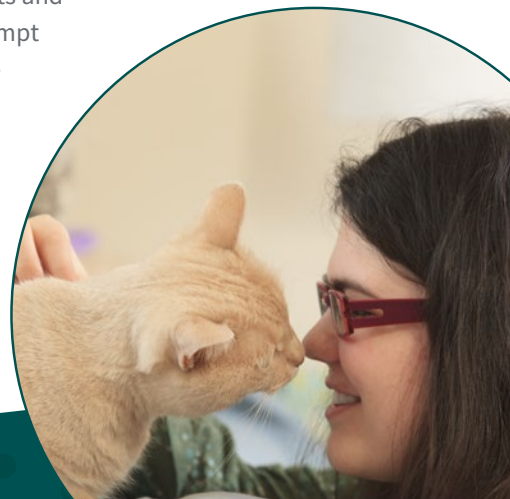
Generalized anxiety disorder is a mental health condition that involves excessive, ongoing anxiety and worry that becomes difficult to control and may interfere with daily functioning. It may co-occur with other mental health challenges. It may also lead to physical issues such as chronic indigestion, migraines, panic attacks, and other mental health issues.

At work, anxiety may result in difficulty focusing and panic attacks. Fortunately, it can be accommodated with flexible scheduling and designated spaces where employees can rest. People who have anxiety can also benefit from learning their triggers and proactively managing them.

Obsessive-compulsive disorder

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) features patterns of repetitive, unwanted thoughts and fears (obsessions), which contribute to repetitive behaviors (compulsions). In their attempt to avoid these behaviors, people with OCD may become extremely anxious, causing the condition to worsen.

Employers should discuss limitations and needs with an employee who discloses they have OCD. These vary widely between individuals. Various accommodations may help — such as subdued lighting, cubicle dividers to reduce distraction, or noise-canceling headphones.



Autism spectrum disorder

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a complex developmental condition that affects social interaction and communication and may involve repetitive behavior. ASD is a spectrum condition, meaning it encompasses several distinct disorders. Consequently, effects and severity may vary widely from one individual to another.

In the workplace, people with autism may have difficulty relating to others, “reading the room,” interpreting nuanced communications, and participating appropriately in activities or social events. However, by developing awareness of ASD, organizations can proactively provide accommodations such as using plain language with visuals, providing granular directions, supporting employees with positive reinforcement, and facilitating social opportunities.

Bipolar disorder

Bipolar disorder, formerly known as manic depression, is a mental health condition characterized by extreme mood swings. These may be episodic and rare or frequent. It's a lifelong condition that can be treated with medication and counseling.

On the job, employees with bipolar disorder may require modifications to job tasks, schedules, or rules and policies. They can also benefit from written task instructions and time-management tools.

Dyslexia

Dyslexia involves difficulty decoding written words into the speech sounds they represent. People with dyslexia usually have normal intelligence and vision but struggle with this reading barrier in school and at work. Many don't disclose their difficulties for years.

Employees with dyslexia can request accommodations such as multisensory instructions, tools to eliminate distractions, and different-colored paper and ink to enhance the readability of the materials they work with.

Dyspraxia

Dyspraxia is a developmental condition involving challenges in movement, coordination, judgment, processing, memory, and cognition. Individuals with this condition may have difficulty performing tasks that require fine and gross motor skills and sequential tasks. Severity ranges among individuals, and the condition sometimes co-occurs with dyslexia, ADHD, and ASD.

Employees with dyspraxia do well when they can organize information in alternative ways, eliminate stimuli, and use tools to read written materials aloud. They can also benefit from positive reinforcement from supervisors.

Stuttering

Stuttering is a speech disorder that is neurologically based. It ranges in severity. People who stutter may suffer from low confidence and, as a result, participate less at work.

Awareness can help employers support people who stutter by providing the option to communicate in writing. In addition, they can support job seekers by providing interview questions in advance.



Epilepsy

Epilepsy is characterized by seizures, which occur because of abnormal electrical activity in the brain. It affects up to 1% of the population, although the severity and frequency of seizures vary widely. While seizures can be unpredictable, people with epilepsy often learn to anticipate triggers, which may include flickering lights, low blood sugar, salt, or alcohol/drugs.

Employees with epilepsy should know they're entitled to ask for accommodations such as filters for computer screens, rest breaks, and work-from-home options. Employers should also ensure the work area is safe, for example, by providing carpeting instead of a concrete floor.

Fibromyalgia

Fibromyalgia is a neurological condition connected with a central nervous system disorder. It causes pain, fatigue, sleep and memory issues, and depression — especially because patients may have difficulty getting a diagnosis.

Fibromyalgia has a profound impact on an employee's ability to work. Unfortunately, employees often face stigma and doubt when requesting accommodations. Employers can help by increasing their awareness of the condition, taking requests seriously, and providing flexible work options.

Parkinson's disease

Parkinson's disease is a neurodegenerative disorder that primarily affects the dopamine-producing neurons in the brain. Symptoms include uncontrollable shaking, slowed movement, stiffness, and difficulty with balance. There may also be difficulties with cognition and executive functioning. The severity depends on the length of time since diagnosis and other individual factors.

An employee with Parkinson's may benefit from modification of job tasks — for example, if they involve sequential steps. A flexible schedule, an ergonomic workstation, and rest breaks can also help.

Gastrointestinal symptoms

Many neurological conditions co-occur with gastrointestinal symptoms, and sometimes gut disorders can cause neurological disease. For example, pernicious anemia, celiac disease, and certain vitamin deficiencies can cause various symptoms. In addition, stomach and intestinal distress can often lead to anxiety, stress, or depression, as well as embarrassment.

Employers can help by being sensitive to these conditions and providing hybrid or work-from-home options. In addition, employees with gastrointestinal symptoms may experience challenges at particular times of day; therefore, a flexible schedule can also help them.



Did you know?

Roughly 10–20% of the world’s population is considered neurodivergent.

— Deloitte

Neurodivergent conditions are unique to each individual, and many fall along a spectrum, as with autism. Such conditions are often accompanied by physical symptoms such as gastrointestinal issues and may co-occur with other neurodivergent conditions.

There are several reasons why organizations have been slow to recognize neurodiversity. For one thing, neurodiversity is often invisible, and individuals may go to some effort to mask neurodivergent characteristics to “fit in.” Moreover, neurodivergent individuals may be undiagnosed, as the spectrum nature of many conditions makes them challenging to identify. The result is that many job seekers, candidates, and employees find themselves struggling to navigate the employment journey, and many organizations remain oblivious to their challenges.

What employers often don’t realize is that neurodiversity comes with many unique advantages. Neurodivergent workers can bring unique perspectives and approaches that lead to new efficiencies and innovations. Neurodiversity can be a distinct competitive advantage² for businesses wanting to break away from conformity and establish themselves as market leaders.



Benefits of Neurodiversity

We've all heard organizations boast that they "think outside the box." But what does this mean? For organizations that employ neurodivergent people, it can mean benefiting from their employees' various working styles, cognitive abilities, and communication methods, which may combine to create a more inclusive, team-oriented workplace. Here are a few examples:



Visual thinking — This is the ability to picture complex processes and engage in systems thinking and process mapping.



Attention to detail — This manifests as extended focus and meticulous attention. This skill has obvious value in job functions such as quality assurance testing and other technical roles where being detail-oriented is crucial.



Abstract thinking and pattern recognition — These encompass the ability to mentally shuffle process steps around, imagine complex sequences, and anticipate the consequences of reordering steps.



Memory — Some neurodivergent individuals have exceptional recall, which makes them invaluable team members because they can ensure that nothing gets forgotten.



Mathematics — Some neurodivergent people have above-average skills in mathematics.



A different perspective — Unusual perspectives can offset the natural tendency to "go along to get along," challenging strategies that aren't working and introducing new options.



Lived experience — Neurodivergent individuals often bring a long history of going against the grain, fighting to get recognition, and navigating a world that isn't built for how they communicate and process information. As such, they are subject matter experts in neurodiversity. If so inclined, they can champion a workplace's efforts to become more inclusive.

These are just a few characteristics that neurodivergent employees may exhibit. Every neurodivergent person is unique, and their skills and abilities will differ.

Neurodivergence shouldn't be considered something that needs to be "fixed" or "mitigated." It can't and shouldn't be changed. Instead, employers can provide support by becoming familiar with the barriers that neurodivergent people face and taking steps to dismantle them in the workplace.

Barriers for Neurodivergent Individuals

Despite the advantages of hiring neurodivergent employees, many organizations fail to tap into this talent pool. This oversight often has to do with hiring processes, which tend to be streamlined and uniform, especially in larger organizations. Most HR departments want to work efficiently, and they may be unprepared for the steps involved in hiring neurodivergent employees. But if they don't put in the time to understand neurodivergent candidates' needs, they won't be able to hire them. As psychologist and neurodiversity expert Dr. Marcia Goddard says, "Neurodiversity should be seen as a competitive advantage for companies ... it can lead to increased creativity, productivity, and innovation."³

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Neurodiversity should be seen as a competitive advantage for companies ... it can lead to increased creativity, productivity, and innovation.

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— Dr. Marcia Goddard, psychologist and neurodiversity expert

For this reason, HR departments should learn about the key challenges that neurodivergent job seekers, candidates, and employees face and how these affect their employment journeys.

Communication

Many neurodivergent individuals communicate differently from their neurotypical peers. For example:

- They may not recognize nonverbal cues.
- They may not recognize idioms or metaphorical expressions.
- They may not realize when someone is using sarcasm or other forms of humor.
- They may be very literal-minded, for example, interpreting “in a couple of minutes” as literally two minutes.
- They may have a strong preference for one communication style over another, for example, they may prefer to absorb information via written versus spoken language or vice versa.
- They may be uncomfortable making eye contact.
- They may not enjoy small talk or perceive any value in it.
- They may have difficulty with turn-taking in conversation.
- They may find it challenging to pay attention to a speaker for a lengthy period.
- They may require extra time to read (as in the case of dyslexia) or may avoid reading.
- They may be blunt or straightforward with others, which can result in hurt feelings and misunderstandings.
- They may be very focused on their own message and have difficulty listening to others unless they first get to communicate their ideas.



These characteristics can sometimes be beneficial. For instance, being direct can be helpful when time is limited and a decision is needed. However, they can also be challenging if colleagues and supervisors are unfamiliar with neurodivergent characteristics. For example, in work environments, “being a team player” means demonstrating finessed communication skills, emotional intelligence, networking skills, and high social conformity. Unless colleagues and supervisors can make space for differences, neurodivergent individuals may be “othered” because of their atypical communication styles.

Social interaction

Social interactions can be challenging situations for many neurodivergent individuals. Some may not see the point in socializing; others may want to socialize but struggle to do so. These challenges are closely related to communication, as humor and small talk feature heavily in social interactions. These often prove to be barriers for neurodivergent individuals.

Attempting to “fit in” socially can lead to exhaustion and even burnout. For example, many individuals on the autism spectrum report “masking” their autistic characteristics — suppressing repetitive, self-soothing behaviors and mimicking neurotypical verbal and nonverbal behavior. This practice of hiding their natural behaviors can take a heavy toll on them throughout the workday. The ongoing effort of masking can end up overemphasizing the sense of being different, leading to feelings of isolation. In addition, spending the day pretending not to be one’s true self is emotionally draining; it can rob a person of the energy to do a good job at work.

Workplaces that emphasize conformity can compound the stress and loneliness that neurodivergent individuals feel. Unless colleagues and supervisors create space for differences, these negative experiences will continue for neurodivergent employees.

Sensory overload

Many neurodivergent individuals are sensitive to bright lights, loud noises, strong smells, or busy environments. These stimuli can multiply the stress associated with the job and even create barriers to specific tasks. For example, employees may avoid rooms where loud machinery operates, become uncomfortable when multiple people are talking in a meeting, or need to take days off when exposure to stimuli becomes unbearable.

Managers and supervisors may not recognize that this is occurring. Instead, they may think an employee is avoiding work, being lazy, or cherry-picking tasks, resulting in other team members having to pick up the slack. If an employee is masking neurodivergent characteristics, their struggles may go unnoticed or misinterpreted for many months. They may end up with a disciplinary notice or even be fired for their behavior without the employer realizing the challenges they’re dealing with.

Sensory overload can bar job seekers from ever securing a job. Anticipated workplace stimuli may be a deal-breaker, and they may never apply in the first place. Or they may exit at the interview stage when they learn the job involves uncomfortable stimuli.

Organizations have learned about workplace flexibility over the past few years. As a result, they now consider flexible options they would never have entertained before. If sensory overload is the only hurdle between an employer and a talented new hire, both parties should discuss it. An open dialogue can help them identify suitable options.



Executive functioning

Many neurodivergent individuals find planning, organizing, and managing their time challenging. They may have difficulty completing tasks and meeting deadlines. As they get behind in their work, they may avoid informing managers that they're struggling. As a result, they won't get the support to overcome barriers associated with executive functioning.⁴

One contributing factor is the potential for embarrassment. Especially if a workplace is fast-moving and oriented toward efficiency and productivity, neurodivergent workers may fear disclosing their difficulties. So instead, they continue, getting increasingly behind and hoping for the best. What can be perceived as a lack of effort may create resentment among team members who feel they're doing more than their share. It can lead to disciplinary action or termination if a critical milestone is missed.

Ironically, executive functioning is often a much smaller part of the job than might be imagined. Many neurodivergent employees are capable of doing most job tasks. However, they can excel if they receive a little help with tasks such as scheduling and creating lists. In fact, getting support with these tasks can often free a neurodivergent individual up to do their best work.

Given the availability of technology and the host of apps available to help people manage their time and tasks, there's no good reason for a workplace not to support executive functioning. But for this to happen, employers and managers need to create a safe space for neurodivergent candidates and employees to disclose their challenges and discuss the tools that can help.



Did you know?

According to a study on ADHD awareness, 32% of individuals with ADHD could not stay employed. Fifty percent had difficulty getting a promotion. Seventy percent had financial difficulties.



Discrimination and stigma

Despite a growing awareness of neurodiversity in workplaces, discrimination and stigma still exist. Coworkers and managers often form assumptions and biases about neurodivergent employees. They may avoid interacting with them or judge them unfairly when they experience sensory overload or need to take time off. They may exclude them from social interactions, such as staff lunches, based on a presumption that they don't want to participate — or worse, a judgment that they would make others uncomfortable.

What's missing from these assumptions and judgments is an honest effort to include neurodivergent individuals. While it's true that some may prefer to work alone and will decline social opportunities, this isn't the case for all, and it's hurtful to make that assumption. Many neurodivergent people have confidence issues because of negative experiences in interviews or on the job.

When noninclusive workplace practices isolate them, their confidence diminishes further.

Fortunately, many workplaces have shifted toward celebrating differences. They've made moves to embrace and welcome workers with neurodivergent characteristics and to reduce the stigma surrounding stereotypical behaviors, recognizing "the value of nerds."⁵ By implementing new practices to hire and develop neurodivergent employees, they demonstrate that diversity matters and that stigma can be overcome.



Did you know?

Approximately 85% of people on the autism spectrum are unemployed.

— Autism Foundation of Oklahoma



Barriers for Workplaces

Employers who commit to hiring and supporting neurodivergent workers must be aware of potential workplace barriers. Below are a few examples to keep in mind.

Lack of awareness

The most significant barrier for neurodivergent individuals is a **lack of awareness**.⁶

- This unfamiliarity with neurodiversity applies at all organizational levels, from leadership to the front line. For example, suppose the C-suite isn't informed about neurodiversity, its potential benefits to the organization, and how to support neurodivergent employees. Leaders won't cascade this information down to human resources, management, supervisors, and employees in that case.
- It applies not just to neurodiversity itself but to the systems and processes that can enable neurodivergent workers to succeed. For example, suppose there are no systems and policies in place to facilitate disclosure of a disability, identify accommodations, and provide them in a timely manner. In that case, many employees will find themselves without support.
- It applies to organizational messaging. It's one thing for an organization to post a diversity statement on its website. It's another thing for the organization's leadership to incorporate DEI&B into everything they communicate, whether external or internal. And to do this well, the entire workforce has to learn about neurodiversity so they're fully informed and can walk the talk.
- It applies to champions. Up to 20% of an organization's workforce may be neurodivergent.⁷ Most organizations have at least one potential champion. However, these individuals must first be identified and then empowered to advocate for themselves individually and as a group. If employees don't feel supported to speak openly about their neurodivergence, they won't be effective champions.



Did you know?

Slightly more than half (51%) of neurodivergent workers want to quit their jobs or already have because they don't feel valued or supported by their employer.

— HR Dive



Lack of support

A second barrier is a lack of support. Shockingly, only 22% of neurodivergent employees report receiving an accommodation at work.⁸ This low rate may be because employees don't come forward to request support. But often, it's due to bureaucracy and lack of information about available support. In some cases, support exists but isn't promoted, so no one knows about it to recommend it. Even if an organization has a disclosure process, it may be reactive, putting the onus on the employee to initiate an accommodation request, identify what they need, and persist until they receive it.

Fear of repercussions

Many neurodivergent job seekers fear they won't be hired if they disclose their condition. Thus, many decide not to disclose, which means embarking on a new career without accommodations. In some cases, employees work for many years at the same organization, never coming forward with an accommodation request. When their work suffers, they don't speak up about their challenges. After years of suppressing their identity, they may lack a true sense of belonging.

Some neurodivergent employees report that when they do disclose their condition, the information gets “weaponized against them.” Suddenly they lose opportunities and experience limits on their career growth.

Lack of communication protocols

A surprising number of organizations lack plain-language protocols. This results in unclear instructions, ambiguities, misunderstandings, and frustration — not just for neurodivergent employees but for everyone. Plain language can also benefit people who don't speak English as a first language, people under time constraints, and anyone whose attention is divided.



Building an Inclusive Workplace for Neurodivergent Employees

Neurodiversity inclusion initiatives have multiple benefits for both employers and employees. Here are a few:



Improved organizational culture and morale — When employees undergo neurodiversity training, they shift from seeing neurodiversity as a disadvantage to celebrating it as an asset.



Better management — Leaders who undergo neurodiversity training become better communicators. As a result, they give better instructions, show more empathy, and form more solid relationships with employees, eliciting higher performance levels.



Increased creativity and innovation — Organizations that appreciate the diverse perspectives of neurodivergent employees benefit from creativity and innovation.



Better retention — Organizations that cultivate inclusivity and provide support report better retention of all employees, neurodivergent and otherwise.



Diverse talent — When organizations implement processes and policies to support neurodivergent workers, they switch from screening out great employees to screening them in.

Responding to Disclosure

An employee's choice to disclose or not disclose a neurodivergent condition is a personal one. However, be aware that when someone discloses, they're probably not doing so lightly. Unfortunately, many job seekers and employees have suffered repercussions after disclosing their conditions. Some have lost opportunities. Some have been treated differently by managers and colleagues based on their diagnoses. Some have had uncomfortable disclosure experiences, where managers asked insensitive questions or made judgments and assumptions. Some have been paraded around the workplace as an example of a "disability hire" or asked to educate their coworkers about their condition without fair compensation.

For all these reasons, **an employer needs to approach an employee's disclosure with empathy, open-mindedness, and humility.** Employers should also become familiar with the types of disclosures so they can respond appropriately. Read on to learn more about disclosures.



Diagnostic disclosure

A person makes a **diagnostic disclosure** when they state that they have a particular medical condition. They don't need to share a medical note, hospital records, or other personal information. However, by sharing their diagnosis, they're entrusting you, as the employer, with this personal medical knowledge. Therefore, it should be shared with others only if the person consents.

When an individual makes a diagnostic disclosure to you:

- Thank them for sharing.
- Confirm with them what language they'd like you to use to reference the diagnosis. For example, some people prefer person-first language (e.g., a person with dyslexia). Others prefer identity-first language (e.g., a dyslexic person).
- Ask them what would help them succeed, whether they're interviewing for a job, starting the job fresh, or disclosing after having been on the job awhile.
- Introduce them to the person in your organization responsible for workplace accommodations. This is often an individual who works in human resources.
- Even if the employee doesn't want an accommodation, let them know they can change their mind later. Let them know accommodations are part of your everyday business and are available to everyone.
- After granting an accommodation, follow up to ensure it works for the person.
- Maintain confidentiality.

Symptomatic disclosure

A person makes a **symptomatic disclosure** when they share that they have particular symptoms or needs. For example, someone may say they occasionally experience seizures without stating they have epilepsy or any other specific seizure-inducing condition. Or they may say, without mentioning a specific condition, "I need to have instructions written down in bullet points — not given verbally. It helps me organize tasks."

When an individual makes a symptomatic disclosure:

- Thank them for sharing.
- Take note of the language they used to share this information with you. Understand that they chose this language for personal reasons. Don't ask probing questions to find out what condition they might have.
- Consider that the person might not have a diagnosed condition. But, again, the case is personal. So, even if you suspect a particular condition, don't make assumptions, and certainly don't suggest they seek a diagnosis.
- Agree to provide the requested accommodations. If they require HR's involvement, introduce the employee to the relevant HR personnel.
- Follow up after granting an accommodation to ensure it works for the person.
- Maintain confidentiality. Even if a specific condition wasn't disclosed, be sensitive to the person's privacy. For example, don't discuss their request with people who don't need to know about it.



Best Practices for Employers

Over the past couple of decades, there's been an explosion of new information on neurodiversity. Here are some best practices to incorporate.

Awareness training

Everyone, regardless of role, can benefit from awareness training. Many organizations already provide DEI&B training; however, disability often tends to be an afterthought — neurodiversity even more so.

Ideally, training should be ongoing and reinforced throughout the year. It should incorporate knowledge (awareness-level training) and practical strategies for managers and coworkers to use in the workplace. Participants can also benefit from implicit bias training to identify mistaken assumptions that stand in the way of a more inclusive culture.

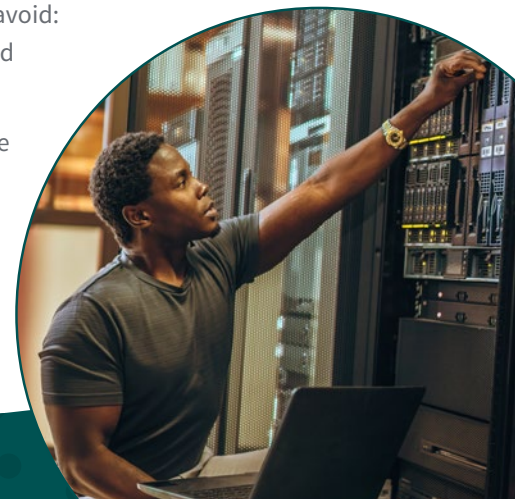
While many organizations design their own training, not every organization has the time and resources to do so effectively. Those without the bandwidth should consider contacting an external consultant for support.

Inclusive hiring processes

Traditional hiring steps such as screening calls and interviews — especially panel interviews or behavioral questions — can be anxiety-inducing for neurodivergent candidates. As a result, they may use valuable processing capacity to manage their anxiety instead of focusing on the interview questions. The result is a less successful interview, often without the hiring manager knowing that neurodiversity was a factor.

Several alternatives can be helpful:

- Offer accommodations up front. Do this for every candidate who interviews — not just those you know to be neurodivergent. This practice communicates to everyone that your workplace is inclusive and supportive. You're not singling anyone out for special treatment.
- Provide the interview questions in advance. Getting a preview of what's to come allows the candidate to formulate answers ahead of time, reducing cognitive demand.
- Avoid behavioral interview questions. For example, avoid: "If you were an animal, what kind of animal would you be?" These abstract questions can be confusing for neurodivergent candidates, and it's debatable whether they uncover valuable information. Try to ask concrete questions that pertain to what the person will be doing on the job.
- Ask one question at a time. Avoid complex or compound questions. For example, avoid: "Tell me about a time when you needed to manage an upset customer and you had competing priorities."
- Provide options for participation. In-person interviews can be intimidating. Ask the candidate if they'd like to do a video interview. If the interview involves a skills demonstration or in-depth description of skills, consider allowing the candidate to supply part of this information via email after the interview.



- Limit the number of people at the interview. Panel interviews can be intimidating. Candidates who experience challenges making eye contact or focusing attention may not know where to look or who to address their answers to. One-on-one interviews are ideal.
- Pay attention to the interview setting. Close doors to minimize noise. Keep the lights soft. Avoid sitting in front of a window, which can distract the interviewee.
- Concentrate on skills, not “fit.” Don’t refer to personality or how people like to socialize. Instead, the candidate needs to determine if their skills match the job requirements.
- If the candidate is working with a job coach, welcome them to the interview (if that’s the candidate’s preference). During the interview, remember that the coach is there to support the candidate, not to talk to you. Address your questions to the candidate. Talk to them, not about them.

Accommodations at work

Knowing that accommodations are available and how to get them can be a tremendous relief for a candidate or employee. But if a neurodivergent individual doesn’t know what’s available, they won’t know to ask for it. Consider providing a checklist of available support. Stress that it’s available to all employees and that accommodations are a normal part of doing business for you. This transparency avoids singling the person out. If possible for the role, consider offering the following:

- Flexible hours
- Work-from-home or hybrid options
- Access to a quiet room to work or rest when needed
- Noise-canceling headphones
- Assistive technology
- Soft lighting
- Communication options — for example, email vs. in-person communication



Did you know?

Accommodations typically cost less than \$500, and many cost much less. Over 50% cost nothing to implement.

— Job Accommodation Network



Duty to accommodate

The main reason for disclosing a condition is to request an accommodation. Employers are required by law to grant reasonable accommodations up to the point of undue hardship. Examples of undue hardship are:

- Requesting a job description be rewritten with so many changes that it's no longer the same job
- Requiring the employer to make significant architectural or engineering changes to the physical workplace
- Asking coworkers to significantly change their jobs, tasks, or responsibilities in a way that causes them hardship

Rarely will a requested accommodation push an employer to the point of undue hardship. In fact, accommodations typically cost less than \$500, and many cost much less. Moreover, over 50% cost nothing to implement.⁹

Manage the career ladder

There's a misperception that neurodivergent employees like to remain in the same job because it's comfortable and predictable. But many neurodivergent workers are ambitious and want to advance in their careers. They may have difficulty getting this across to their supervisors.

Take the time to check in with neurodivergent employees to get their impressions about their work and how they're progressing. Offer them development opportunities. If they seem hesitant to take advantage of opportunities, find out why. You don't have to pressure people to advance if they don't want to — just be aware of the possible reasons for hesitation. These may include fear of failure, fear of navigating a new workplace environment, or anxiety about change. Employees may even worry that they can't return to their old job if the new one doesn't work out. Provide as much reassurance as you can, with the flexibility to match.

Importantly, remember that career growth is different for everyone. Therefore, avoid prescribing a set career path. Instead, work with the employee to personalize a path.

Manage stress

Neurodivergent employees experience higher-than-average levels of workplace stress. Unexpected events, interruptions, changes to work routines, and situations beyond their control can increase anxiety. When atypical circumstances arise, check in with neurodivergent employees to ensure they're okay.

Be aware that some activities intended to reduce stress (such as team-building social events) can have the opposite effect on neurodivergent employees. Keep these events optional. And if a neurodivergent employee consistently opts out, consider how you can help that person feel included and appreciated.



Key Takeaways

Despite significant progress and heightened awareness of DEI&B, many organizations still have work to do. Part of that work involves understanding the benefits of neurodiversity in the workplace.

- Organizations with inclusive workforces are **twice as likely to meet or exceed financial targets**, three times more likely to be high-performing, and eight times more likely to achieve business outcomes.¹⁰
- Research shows that employees with disabilities, including those who are neurodivergent, have **higher job retention rates** than those without disabilities.¹¹
- Research finds that embracing neurodiversity in the workplace can lead to **increased innovation and problem-solving**.¹²
- A survey by Deloitte found that organizations that prioritize diversity and inclusion, including neurodiversity, have **higher levels of employee engagement and satisfaction**.¹³

It's also essential to define what it means to include neurodivergent employees.

- Who currently isn't included and needs to be? Which job seekers, candidates, and employees face barriers, and how can these be addressed? Where along the employee journey are neurodivergent employees facing the most significant challenges?
- What behaviors should be encouraged? How can leadership promote inclusive behaviors, provide mentoring and support, manage performance, and provide feedback that sets neurodivergent employees up for success?
- What behaviors should be eliminated? How can managers and employees become more aware of their biases and work to mitigate them?
- How do we know whether our organization is truly inclusive? What auditing processes can be used to evaluate the employee journey throughout the stages of attraction, recruitment, interviewing, hiring, orientation and onboarding, professional development, and advancement?
- How does inclusion fit in with our mission, vision, and values? Is accessibility included in those values? Is the organization truly demonstrating its commitment to an inclusive culture?

It's worthwhile for organizations to devote time to these questions — either using in-house resources or an external consultant. Some organizations are well on their way to becoming truly inclusive with strategies and processes in place. Others may need a little help to act on their DEI&B commitment.

Wherever your organization is on the trajectory toward inclusion, continue learning about it, championing it, and sharing your commitment.



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Parris Consulting is a diversity, equity, accessibility, and inclusion-focused consulting firm based in Vancouver, Canada. We are dedicated to assisting organizations across North America in building equitable, diverse, and inclusive workforces.

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