



Neurodiversity in the workplace

Every person is unique. We all have our different traits and ways of doing things. But some people, have their own unique challenges and opportunities because their brains work differently to other people. This is known as neurodivergence.

At Aviva, we believe in working in partnership to help improve the health and wellbeing of all employees. That's why we've produced this guide to help you better understand and manage neurodiversity in your workplace.

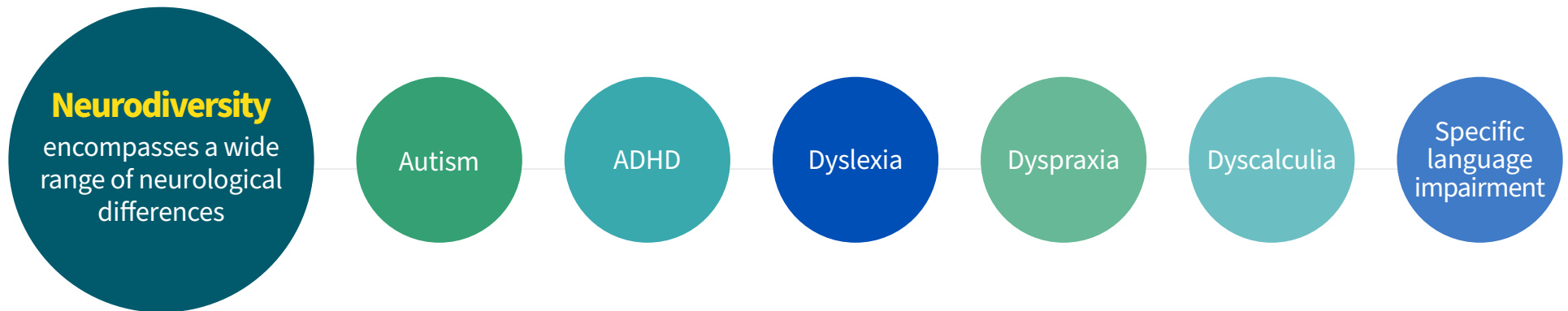


What is neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity is the idea that cognitive conditions are natural variations in the way people think and process information. These variations or affected traits can include issues with sociability, learning, attention and regulating moods.

Here are some of the common traits neurodivergent people can have, regardless of their specific condition:¹

- ✓ Sensitive
- ✓ Empathetic
- ✓ Honest
- ✓ Innovative
- ✓ Good at problem solving
- ✓ Mental health issues
- ✓ Masking their traits
- ✓ At risk of manipulation
- ✓ People pleasing
- ✓ Difficulty fitting in
- ✓ Difficult early experiences
- ✓ Differences in processing and/or understanding information
- ✓ Difficulty regulating moods



The content of this guide has been designed to use accurate terminology. However, some people prefer not to be referred to as neurodivergent or neurotypical. It's therefore important that you **discuss this with the individual**.

¹<https://neurodiversityassociation.com/what-is-neurodiversity/>

Why neurodivergent people are an asset in the workplace

With around one in seven people estimated to be neurodivergent², it's more than likely you will have employees with a neurodiverse condition, and often they bring great value to your workplace.

Because they literally think differently to neurotypical people, neurodivergent employees approach situations differently, which can be invaluable. Often, their capacity for thinking in an unorthodox way means neurodivergent employees can be skilled at things like:

- ✔ spotting patterns and trends
- ✔ thinking creatively
- ✔ analysing data
- ✔ innovating
- ✔ solving problems
- ✔ processing information quickly
- ✔ taking risks
- ✔ paying attention to detail
- ✔ seeing things from a different perspective
- ✔ keeping things consistent

These traits can be massively valuable to any organisation. In fact, many neurodivergent people have become hugely successful in their field, including:

- Jennnifer Aniston, actor
- David Bailey, photographer
- Simone Biles, gymnast
- Richard Branson, entrepreneur
- Cher, actor and singer
- Tom Cruise, actor
- Walt Disney, businessman
- Billie Eilish, musician
- Albert Einstein, scientist
- John F Kennedy, US president
- Keira Knightley, actor
- John Lennon, musician
- Pablo Picasso, painter
- Jamie Oliver, chef
- Daniel Radcliffe, actor
- Steven Spielberg, director
- Emma Watson, actor
- Florence Welch, singer

²<https://www.donaldsons.org.uk/neurodiversity/>

Don't walk by potential talent

Research by the National Autistic Society shows only 16% of autistic adults in the UK are in full-time employment, but 77% of unemployed autistic people want to work³. This represents a massive pool of talent with high potential that businesses could tap into by taking into account the needs of neurodivergent people.

“ It is now widely accepted that neurominorities represent in total a large percentage of the overall population, likely greater than 10%. For organisations, this means that more than one in ten job applicants, existing staff and customers are likely neurodivergent in some way. ”

—
CIPD, Neurodiversity at work, 2018

³<https://www.autism.org.uk/what-we-do/news/government-must-tackle-the-autism-employment-gap>

Diversity and inclusion make for a better workplace

If everybody was the same, we'd all make the same decisions and come to the same conclusions – and that isn't good for business. Having people in your workforce who literally think differently challenges the status quo and can bring out the best in everyone, potentially opening up different avenues.

However, many workplaces are designed around neurotypical people, from the physical environment to management practices to hiring processes. That means many neurodivergent people can find these things harder and more stressful to deal with.

How neurodivergent people may find the workplace challenging

Conventional interviews may be overwhelming for those who have difficulty with social interactions

Open plan offices can be problematic for those sensitive to noise and light

A messy spreadsheet can be difficult for people with dyslexia or dyscalculia

Repetitive work is unlikely to suit a person with ADHD

A job which requires coordination may be challenging for a person with dyspraxia

Play to employees' strengths for a better overall outcome for everyone

Acknowledging neurodiversity in the workplace matters. It lets you understand your employees' needs better and it can help you build on strengths that can benefit your business. It's always easier to get the best out of people when you focus on what they can do rather than what they can't.

Think of your workforce like a sports team. For example, a football manager slots players into the position they are most suited for to get the best out of them. If you can do that with your employees – neurodivergent ones as well as neurotypical ones – you could find yourself reaping the rewards.

Neurodiversity isn't a mental health condition, but neurodivergent people can face particular difficulties which can put them at a **higher risk of developing mental illness.**





Line managers can be offered **specialist training** to help them better understand and support the individual's exact needs. It's important to remember that **the neurodiversity spectrum is wide ranging** and two people with autism for example, may have completely different needs. There's no one size fits all solution. The support needs to be as unique as the individual themselves.

It also helps to have open and honest conversations and educate neurotypical employees about issues their colleagues may face. This will help lessen instances of where lack of sympathy or empathy – or even bullying – negatively affect neurodivergent employees.

By learning about neurodiversity, you can take steps to make sure your workplace does not make life more difficult for people who are wired differently. While not every neurodivergent individual will identify as having a disability, there will be those that do. So, this may also leave you less open to claims of discrimination. If you understand neurodiversity, you can take reasonable steps to adjust your workplace to help these employees. And because **neurodivergent people bring unique skills to their roles**, providing an environment that can help get the best from them could give you a competitive edge in your business.

Five steps to making your workplace more accessible

In many cases, you can transform your workplace into a less challenging arena for neurodivergent employees by making a few changes:

1

Pay attention to the physical environment

- Some neurodivergent people can be sensitive to noise and light, so provide adjustable lighting and screen partitions or set aside quiet, less brightly lit areas for these employees to use. Some people may find quiet environments distracting. The use of noise cancelling headphones or enabling homeworking can also be helpful to those that are sensitive to their environment.
- Complete a desk assessment for new joiners to make sure their computer screen isn't too bright, and they have any tools they need to help with organisation (trays, drawers, screen overlay, daily planner, and so on)
- If possible, offer employees technology to help them perform tasks, such as speech-to-text software or time management applications
- Allow individuals to work from home

2

Communicate clearly and listen

- Be clear and precise with your communications and instructions – use direct language, say what you mean, ask specific questions
- Offer information in different formats to help people digest information differently
- Steer clear of jargon in job descriptions
- Assign work tasks appropriately to play to an employee's strengths
- Ask your employees for regular feedback to make sure you're meeting their needs
- Make sure managers have regular 1-2-1 conversations with employees to get to know them better

Steps to making your workplace more accessible

3

Educate your workforce

- Offer training to all your employees in neurodiversity and how it can affect people
- Encourage an open, honest culture, where employees feel able to be themselves without fear of being treated differently
- Train managers to be confident they can help neurodivergent employees use their skills at work

4

Use positive language

- Don't refer to people as 'suffering' from a neurological or special learning condition
- Don't refer to neurodivergent people as having learning difficulties – for many this is not true as they will have no difficulty learning new skills or understanding new concepts
- Use the **government's guide to inclusive language**

5

Create a workplace policy on neurodiversity

- This will give you a framework for your managers and employees to follow
- It can set out steps that can help prevent discrimination, harassment, and victimisation
- Review your recruitment policies to make sure you are welcoming to neurodivergent employees and not screening out potential talent
- Signpost to useful resources or support networks.

Aviva's Recruitment Placement Programme

We're committed to improving the employability of neurodivergent individuals. To help us do this, we worked with Cambridge University and our Quantum data science team to develop a toolkit to help neurodivergent individuals to thrive in the job market.

Our learnings:

Stage 1: Application

- **Job advert:** advertise the role through multiple channels with simple and explicit language, logical formatting, and clearly defined work expectations.
- **Job application:** tailor application to the skills required using a consistent template with a range of accessibility options.

Our learnings:

Stage 2: Interviewing

- **Personalised approach:** Interview questions should highlight the individual's transferable skills and past experiences, whilst avoiding general, open-ended questions. Reasonable adjustments should be handled on an individual-need basis.
- **Flexible Processes:** Ensuring a range of format options are available for candidates to evidence suitability, rather than the more traditional approach of asking for a CV, should be strongly considered.
- **Eye on the detail:** It is advised that interviewers hone their interview questions, avoiding ambiguous terminology and abstract concepts.

Stage 3: Support Talent

- **Understanding individual needs:** Each neurodivergent individual is different, and it is important to understand their individual needs.
- **Placement feedback:** To help identify areas needing improvement and gives the individuals opportunities to offer suggestions on how to improve the placement programme.
- **The importance of detail:** It is important to support the individual and avoid certain anxieties ahead of their joining. A set of preparatory resources should be sent ahead of their start date.

Stage 4: Ongoing support

Document the individual's needs and agree workplace adaptations – Aviva does this through a voluntary 'Workplace Adjustment Passport'. The purpose of the passport is to make it easy for the individual and their manager to discuss how their disability or condition impacts their ability to do their role. It also acts as a tool to capture (and review) all agreed workplace adjustments, whether they are physical changes to their working environment or alterations to their working arrangements.

- **Induction programme:** introduce a clear induction programme tailored to the individual's needs.
- **Improve accessibility:** support the individual with specialist software such as screen magnification, dictation and transcribe software and mind mapping tools.
- Allocate a buddy to help mentor and support the individual
- **Ongoing review:** ensure you regularly catch-up with the individual to review the situation and make adaptations as required. A document such as Aviva's Workplace Adjustment Passport can help enable these conversations.
- **Draw upon expert support:** to equip line managers with the knowledge they need to support neurodivergent individuals. Aviva is working with Exceptional Individuals to support our Recruitment Placement Programme.

A Workplace Adjustment Passport may also be useful for people:



With non-visible disabilities
(such as depression,
anxiety, dyslexia, diabetes,
and Crohn's disease)



With physical disabilities
(such as visual, hearing,
and movement impairments)



With other health conditions
(like episodic conditions such as
migraines, or chronic conditions,
like asthma or cancer)



Going through
transition at work



Who have caring
responsibilities (such as
someone caring for an elderly
parent, or a disabled child)



Who are breastfeeding and
need to express during their
normal working hours



Who are practicing
a religious event



Who are returning from
a period of long term
sickness absence e.g. on a
phased return to work plan.

Neurodivergent conditions

Most people with a neurodivergent condition will fall somewhere on a spectrum and some may have more than one condition. Each condition has a range of symptoms, which can vary from person to person. The effects of some of those symptoms may also change over time.



Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Around 3-4% of the adult population in the UK are thought to have ADHD, although many of these will be undiagnosed⁴. People with ADHD may seem restless, have trouble with concentration and may act on impulse. On the other hand, people with ADHD may demonstrate a very high degree of focus on other tasks. This is sometimes called hyperfocus.

Some workers with ADHD excel in work environments with high levels of stimulus. They may flourish under pressure and be good at completing urgent or physical tasks.⁵

ADHD was previously known as Attention Deficit Disorder or ADD.

Traits

- May have a short attention span and be easily distracted
- May make careless mistakes
- May be forgetful
- May continually lose or misplace things
- May be unable to stick to tedious or time-consuming tasks
- May be unable to listen to or carry out instructions
- May have poor organisation skills
- May talk or move a lot
- May fidget a lot and be unable to sit still, especially in calm or quiet surroundings
- May interrupt or be unable to wait their turn
- May have little or no sense of danger

Source: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/attention-deficit-hyperactivity-disorder-adhd/>

⁴<https://www.adhdcoaching.org/adhdfacts>

⁵<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20210104113255/https://archive.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=6676>

Autism (ASD)

Autism is a lifelong developmental disability which affects how people communicate and interact with the world. An estimated 700,000 people in the UK have a diagnosis of autism⁶.

Diagnoses that fall under the umbrella of Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) include Asperger's Syndrome and Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD – NOS).

Many autistic people can appear highly articulate and are able to work productively in many roles and sectors.

Traits

- May find it hard to communicate and interact with other people
- May find it hard to understand how other people think or feel
- May find things like bright lights or loud noises overwhelming, stressful or uncomfortable
- May get anxious or upset about unfamiliar situations and social events
- May take longer to understand information
- May do or think the same things over and over

Source: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/>

⁶<https://www.beyondautism.org.uk/about-autism/understanding-autism/statistics/>

Dyslexia

Around 6.3 million people in the UK have dyslexia - that's around 10% of the population⁷. Dyslexia is often characterised by problems with reading and writing. A dyslexic person may also face other challenges such as sequencing, processing of information, working memory, and phonological processing. Many people with dyslexia have strong visual, creative and problem-solving skills.

Traits

- Difficulty filling in forms and writing reports
- Tendency to miss and confuse appointment times
- Concerns about training or promotion
- Difficulty structuring work schedules
- Low opinion of capabilities
- Constantly loses and forgets items and information
- Difficulty with map reading
- Literacy challenges including spelling and grammar

Source: <https://www.dyslexia.uk.net/what-is-dyslexia/>

Dyspraxia

Also known as Developmental Co-ordination Disorder, dyspraxia is a common disorder that affects movement and co-ordination. Up to 10% of the UK population are thought to have the condition⁸.

Dyspraxic people may encounter problems with fine and/or gross motor activities. This can present challenges for activities that involve writing or using small objects. It can also affect balance, cause problems with organisation and working memory, and make people particularly sensitive to sensory stimuli.

Traits

- May struggle with co-ordination, balance and movement
- Affects how they learn new skills, think and remember information
- May have difficulty with time management, planning and personal organisation skills
- May have problems writing, typing, drawing and grasping small objects
- May struggle with social situations
- May find it difficult to deal with their emotions

Source: <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/developmental-coordination-disorder-dyspraxia-in-adults/>

⁷<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/understanding-disabilities-and-impairments-user-profiles/simone-dyslexic-user>

⁸<https://www.learningdisabilities.org.uk/learning-disabilities/a-to-z/d/dyspraxia>

Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia is a neurological condition that may affect mathematical functions. It is not the same as simply struggling with maths, although research is ongoing, often people with this condition have another condition such as dyslexia, dyspraxia or ADHD. It's estimated that around 3-6% of the UK population have dyscalculia⁹.

Traits

- Difficulties with counting backwards
- Difficulty remembering 'basic' facts
- Slow to perform calculations
- Weak mental arithmetic skills
- A poor sense of numbers and estimates
- May get upset or frustrated when faced with activities involving mathematics

Source: <https://www.dyslexia.uk.net/specific-learning-difficulties/dyscalculia/>

Dysgraphia

Dysgraphia involves neurological difficulties with the act of handwriting and potentially other fine motor skills, such as spelling and finger sequencing (which may affect typing). This condition is mainly about challenges caused by trouble with motor skills and visual processing. It doesn't affect a person's intelligence.

Traits

- May struggle forming letters
- May have trouble writing grammatically correct sentences
- May have difficulty spacing letters correctly
- May have trouble writing in a straight line
- May have problems holding and controlling a writing tool
- May have difficulty writing clearly enough to read it back later
- May not be able to write complete words without skipping letters

Source: <https://www.understood.org/articles/en/understanding-dysgraphia>

⁹<https://www.dyslexia.uk.net/specific-learning-difficulties/dyscalculia/>



Finding additional support

Autism - NHS (www.nhs.uk)

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) - NHS (www.nhs.uk)

Dyslexia - NHS (www.nhs.uk)

Developmental co-ordination disorder (dyspraxia) in children
- NHS (www.nhs.uk)

ADHD Foundation

The Autism Trust UK

What is Neurodiversity? (autisticuk.org)

Useful autism resources and training (www.nhs.uk)

Special educational needs and disability (SEND): detailed information

Neurodiversity Celebration Week 2021

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GEN7433 10/2021 REG015 (61780)

