

Primer: Neuro-Inclusion at Work

Creating workplaces that work for neurodivergent employees

“Creating inclusive spaces where everyone can flourish does not have to be difficult, resource-heavy, or costly. In fact, up to 95% of possible adjustments are not costly to implement.”

— [A Neurodivergent Lens: Recommended Practices for Neuroinclusivity](#)

This Primer covers some basic strategies and tools for including and affirming neurodivergent employees. This is not a complete list. No one strategy or set of tools will work for everyone. Be open to learning what works best, and what you can do to support neurodivergent colleagues.

Each neurodivergent person is unique, and has different needs, desires, and aspirations. We are all experts on ourselves.

Neurodivergent employees bring many strengths to the workplace:

- Passion and focus to dive deeply into a topic or project
- Pattern recognition, information synthesis, attention to detail, and ability to think outside the box
- New perspectives and innovative ideas
- Creativity and energy

Cognitive diversity in the workplace can lead to:

- Innovative and creative ways of seeing and solving problems
 - Better employee engagement, retention, and team dynamics
 - Higher productivity
 - An increased sense of belonging and welcoming workplace culture for all employees
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What does neurodivergent mean?

- **Neurodivergent** (ND) is a strengths-based way of describing people who have brain-based differences in the way they think, sense, communicate, learn, and socialize.
- **Examples of neurodivergence** include autism, ADHD, Tourette's syndrome, dyslexia and other learning disabilities, and a range of other learning, social, and neurological differences.
- Some neurodivergent people identify as having a **disability**; some don't.
- Neurodivergence is often "invisible", which can make accessing help more difficult.
- People who are not neurodivergent can be described as **neurotypical** (NT).
- **Neurodiversity** describes the range of brains that's all around us. A person can't be neurodiverse. A group can, and often is!

What do neuro-affirming and neuro-inclusive mean?

- In the past, we talked about autism and other types of neurodivergence as conditions that should be cured or fixed. Today, we understand that a substantial minority of people are neurodivergent.
- NDs may need adaptations, accommodations, and flexibility to reach their full potential and be included at work, in school, and in the community.
- Neuro-affirming and neuro-inclusive workplaces take the needs of ND employees into account and build environments, systems, policies, and social settings where we can all succeed, contribute, and take part equally.

Accessibility barriers for neurodivergent people

Recent research has identified workplace barriers that neurodivergent employees face:

1. **Communication and social differences**
 - Some NDs have a direct communication style that NTs may find blunt
 - NDs may have a hard time participating in group conversations because they need more time to process
 - Some NDs struggle to understand and remember complex instructions, policies, or systems.
2. **Sensory overload and overwhelm**
 - Overstimulation from bright or flickering lights, noise, visual information, fire alarms, temperature, or physical discomfort.
 - Not enough uninterrupted work time.
 - Lack of personal space to create a comfortable work environment.
 - Too many demands at one time.
3. **Inflexible work**
 - Not being allowed to work from home or have a flexible schedule.

- Lack of respect for personal accommodation strategies, like wearing headphones, using stim toys, or closing an office door.
- 4. **Stigma, prejudice, and lack of understanding**
 - Prejudice against neurodivergence itself (eg, the idea that ND people are weird or rude and should act more like NT people)
 - Stigma directed at ND accommodations (eg, the idea that a flexible schedule or a quiet space is “special treatment”)
 - Lack of understanding that neurodivergence is a neurodevelopmental difference and not a behaviour or mental health issue.

The consequences of not including and affirming neurodivergent employees are significant. For employees, they include burnout, problems completing job duties, lack of productivity, illness, and social isolation. For employers, they include missing out on different ways of thinking and problem solving, lower productivity, absenteeism, and toxic work environments.

What helps inclusion and belonging?

Evidence from neurodivergent employees and standards professionals tells us that simple interventions, accommodations, and adaptations help ND workers perform better and feel more included at work.

1. **Flexible hiring and work policies and respect for individual choice**
 - Use ND-friendly recruiting and interview strategies (see the list below).
 - Allow flexible schedules and work from home.
 - Trust your employees to know what works best for them.
2. **Sensory-friendly environments and meetings**
 - Provide a range of work environments, including sensory-friendly quiet spaces with low lighting and interruption-free zones.
 - Facilitate meetings to make sure everyone who wants to participate gets a chance to (see the list below).
3. **Education and awareness programs**
 - Provide high-quality education to all employees about neurodivergence, by ND trainers.
 - Make sure ND voices are at the table when you’re planning and making decisions.
4. **Clear and direct communication, systems, policies, and procedures**
 - Simplify processes and systems.
 - Communicate clearly using plain language.
 - Give instructions in smaller chunks or step by step.
 - Make sure roles are clear and predictable.
5. **Accommodations, assistive technology and devices, and support from supervisors and colleagues**

- Welcome technology that makes the work of NDs easier, including headphones, voice to text and read-aloud programs, AI, Alexa, and tech that supports people who may not speak.
 - 6. **Social inclusion and adaptations**
 - Consider ND colleagues and employees when you plan meetings, lunches, and social events. Is the venue sensory-friendly or adaptable? Are you directly inviting everyone and not assuming they “know” they’re invited? Are you learning about autistic and ND social communication and how it’s different from NT communication?
 - Some NDs may find office politics and socializing exhausting. Respect their choice not to participate.
 - Let ND people be themselves. For example, some NDs stim. This means they may rock, flap their hands, pace, or use a stim toy to feel more comfortable. This is normal, harmless, and an important strategy for nervous system regulation. It doesn’t need to be stopped or questioned.
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Simple neuro-affirming strategies that help everyone

- **Make space for and celebrate different brains.** If you find yourself thinking “This person is odd, or weird, or difficult,” ask yourself if they simply have a different way of relating socially to others. Be curious and patient.
- **Don’t assume people are neurotypical** unless they tell you otherwise — be inclusive and don’t expect people to disclose their disability or difference. Assume competence and find out what you can do to support it.
- **Don’t expect employees to ASK for help.** Asking and self-advocacy can be very difficult. Find ways to initiate check-ins and supports.
- **Know that just because a person can complete a task or handle a noisy office today doesn’t mean they will be able to tomorrow.** What we can do or handle fluctuates depending on others stresses, demands, and what supports are in place.
- **Recognize that staying organized can be a challenge.** This is not a behaviour problem and will not be solved by “consequences”. Look for ways to support and accommodate, like a weekly check-in meeting or a shared calendar.
- **Hold space for everyone to participate in meetings and conversations.** Try facilitated approaches that explicitly give each person a chance to be heard, like talking/sharing circles or passing an object around to show whose turn it is to talk.
- **Don’t be afraid of pauses in conversation.** Some of us need time to process before we speak.
- **Behaviour IS communication.** Some people have meltdowns and shutdowns when they get overwhelmed. This is often a response to an unmet need, sensory overload, or unexpected situation. If this happens, create quiet space for the person away

from others, ask if you can call someone to help, and wait quietly. It might feel a bit scary, but staying calm and present will help.

- **The more neuroinclusive your workplace is, the more comfortable it will be for all employees.**
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Neuro-inclusive meetings

1. **Provide agendas and materials well in advance.** This gives everyone time to process information and prepare.
2. **Offer different ways to take part.** Allow people to contribute via chat, shared documents, or follow-up emails—not just verbal input. This takes communication preferences into account and takes away the pressure to speak spontaneously.
3. **Create a sensory-friendly environment.** Reduce background noise, harsh lighting, and interruptions. Allow cameras to be off.
4. **Be clear about expectations and times.** Say how long the meeting will last and stick to it, share who is responsible for what and when.
5. **Take breaks and check in.** Schedule short breaks. Check in at the beginning and end to see how people are doing. Ask what worked well in the meeting and what could be improved.

(Adapted from the work of [Prof. Amanda Kirby](#), via LinkedIn)

Neuro-inclusive hiring

Traditional recruitment and hiring processes are not ND-friendly. Here are a few tips:

- Job postings should have clear language and layout, basic colours, and describe the type of work and work environment. Include options like audio and video links.
- Offer choices for interviews: in-person or online, or the option to do portions of the interview in writing or asynchronously. Provide verbal and written instructions and detailed questions well in advance.
- Give onboarding support and encourage new hires to ask for help or more information. Schedule regular check-ins and review unwritten social norms in your workplace.

Keep ND employees by offering lots of choice about communication:

- Allow flexible forms of contact, including emails and chats, texts, voice memos, and phone calls.
- Limit direct contact to one person or a small group.
- Meet in small groups.
- Make sure messages are clear and direct, and let ND employees know that clear and direct messages from them are welcome.
- Follow up verbal instructions with written instructions.
- Give and accept specific, regular feedback.

Source: Some of the material in this Primer is adapted from [A Neurodivergent Lens: Recommended Practices for Neuroinclusivity](#).

Learn More

[A Neurodivergent Lens: Recommended Practices for Neuroinclusivity](#) — Accessibility Institute, Carleton University

[Neurodiversity in the Workplace: A Toolkit for Employers, Leaders, & Colleagues](#) — Western University

[Building Workplaces Where Neurodivergent Workers Thrive](#) — Conference Board of Canada

[Exploring Self-employment as an Inclusive Pathway for Neurodivergent Canadians— February 2025](#) — Conference Board of Canada

[How to Create a Neuroinclusive Workplace: Guide for Teams and Managers](#) — Oxford University

[Including Neurodivergent Workers: Job Descriptions and Interviewing](#) — EARN: Employer Assistance and Resource Network on Disability

[Building the neuroinclusive workplace](#) — Deloitte

[Neuroinclusion at work report 2024](#) — CIPD: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

[Here's why employers should do more to embrace neurodiversity in the workplace](#) — CBC

[How To Build An Inclusive Recruitment Process That Supports Neurodiversity In The Workplace](#) — Forbes

[Building a Neuroinclusive Workplace](#) — Wall Street Journal