



A Guide to Neurodiversity



What is Neurodiversity?



Neurodiversity is defined as **“the range of differences in individual brain function and behavioural traits, regarded as part of normal variation in the human population”**.

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term used to refer to dyslexia, Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), formally known as dyspraxia, dyscalculia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC), and Tourette’s syndromes.

Individuals who are neurodiverse **have a variety of difficulties and strengths**. Each condition presents its own challenges, and their cognitive profiles overlap, which means individuals can have co-occurring conditions. Experiencing more than one type of neurodiverse condition is common.

“Neurodiverse” is the term used to describe individuals that display a different way of perceiving the world and of handling information. People with neurodiversity may think holistically rather than logically, which can be a challenge in the workplace but also a valuable skill – the ability to “think outside the box”. Neurodiverse employees may encounter difficulty when their way of thinking conflicts with the environment. The most apparent **workplace challenges include poor organisation, general slowness of working, sequencing, structuring, concentration, and stress.**

Neurodiverse conditions are on a spectrum, ranging from individuals who experience mild or few difficulties, to those that experience severe difficulty. Many will require support to reach their full potential.



Neurodiversity

Facts



- Neurodiverse conditions are defined as **disabilities** under the Equality Act 2010
- It is estimated that around **1 in 7 people** (more than 15% of people in the UK) are neurodivergent
- Approximately **10% of the population are dyslexic**
- About **3% of the population are dyspraxic**
- The adult **ADHD population is approximately 3.5%**
- It is estimated that **40% of individuals with dyspraxia also experience ADHD**
- Approximately **50% of individuals with dyslexia/DCD have visual difficulties** compared to the general public
- **67% of dyslexic individuals request support for stress** at work
- Disabled people are twice as likely to be unemployed than those without a disability
- Around **1.1% of the UK has a diagnosis on the autism spectrum**, which is more than one in 100. There are around 700,000 people in the UK living with ASC
- Only 10% of adults with ASC receive employment support but 53% say they want it



Neurodiverse Conditions



Dyslexia:

The British Dyslexia Association (BDA) describe dyslexia as involving **difficulties which affect the learning process in one or more of reading, spelling, and writing**. Accompanying weaknesses may be identified in areas of speed of processing, short-term memory, sequencing, auditory and/or visual perception, spoken language, and motor skills.

Potential challenges:

- May struggle with tasks involving working memory.
- May struggle with literacy-based tasks, especially when required to do these at speed.
- Will struggle to find mistakes in their own or others' work – 'proof reading'.
- May struggle with deadlines and organisation of work load.

Potential strengths:

- A holistic approach (seeing the big picture) to dealing with the world. This method of thinking can provide individuals with strengths which can be uniquely valuable to the workplace.
- The ability to provide fast, hands-on problem solving or "thinking outside the box". This type of holistic thinking might make them particularly good at working under pressure. If an employee's strengths can be unlocked, they may have the potential to be one of the most creative, innovative thinkers in the organisation.
- Working well in management roles that involve strategic thinking and planning.



Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), also known as Dyspraxia:

Developmental dyspraxia is **an impairment or immaturity of the organisation of movement**. It is associated with problems of perception, language, and thought.

Potential strengths:

The strengths that someone with a DCD diagnosis may experience are similar to those with dyslexia. They will likely be good at 'bigger picture thinking' and be able to plan and focus in a strategic way. In addition, they may also:

- Have good interpersonal skills such as sensitivity, sympathy, and caring.
- They may also have good attention to detail and intuition.

Potential challenges:

- May struggle with organisation of tasks in general but specifically regarding fine or gross motor control, e.g., they may find tasks such as typing and controlling a mouse difficult despite frequent exposure.
- May struggle with gross motor tasks and appear 'clumsy' such as dropping things, misjudging distances or space.
- May struggle with tasks involving working memory and handwriting may be unclear and untidy.

Dyscalculia:

Dyscalculia is **a condition that affects the ability to acquire arithmetical skills**. Dyscalculic learners may have difficulty understanding simple number concepts, lack an intuitive grasp of numbers, and have problems learning number facts and procedures. Even if they produce a correct answer or use a correct method, they may do so mechanically and without confidence.

Potential strengths:

- Innovative thinkers.
- Excellent trouble shooters.
- Intuitive problem solving.
- Creative in many ways.
- Lateral thinkers.

Potential challenges:

- Difficulty with numeracy-based tasks, for example maths, estimating, and handling money.
- Likely to also experience difficulties with working memory based tasks.

ADHD:

There are three subtypes of ADHD:

- inattentive,
- hyperactive/impulsive,
- and a combination of inattentive, hyperactive/impulsive.

The NHS gives this definition: **"Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a behavioural disorder that includes symptoms such as inattentiveness, hyperactivity, and impulsiveness."**



The symptoms of ADHD usually improve with age, but many adults who were diagnosed with the condition at a young age continue to experience problems. People with ADHD may also have additional problems, such as sleep and anxiety disorders.

Potential challenges:

- All three subtypes typically include difficulties with sequencing and working memory which can impact an individual's ability to organise themselves in the workplace.
- ADHD is also associated with working memory weaknesses.
- In addition, a person may struggle to focus and be easily distracted, and/or alternatively, they can become 'hyper focused' to the exclusion of other tasks.

Potential strengths:

- inventiveness
- adaptability
- creativity and curiosity
- people skills
- training delivery
- practicality
- good IT skills
- strong visualisation/imagination/artistic
- determination and persistence
- motivation and ambition

Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC) formally known as Asperger's and Autism:

ASC is a lifelong, **developmental condition that impacts an individual's ability to understand the world around them.** Specifically, this relates to communication and the perception of the world around them. Asperger's and Autism are still used under certain classification systems.

Potential challenges:

- Difficulties with social communication and social interactions – ASC people may find it hard to join in conversations or make friends.
- Females and males may present differently, and although females may have friendships, they may prefer one to one friendship or to be on the edges of groups or teams.
- Repetitive behaviour, routines, and activities – such as fixed daily routines and repetitive body movements.

Potential strengths:

Employees demonstrate many strengths in the workplace. In a supportive job and with a good understanding of ASC a person can thrive and bring success to any business. Here are some examples of the unique strengths a person with ASC may have:

- A natural ability to recognise patterns or trends within data sets very quickly.
- High attention to detail and excellent problem-solving skills.
- Excellent memory for facts or dates.
- Reliability, high retention, and loyalty.
- They may show a preference for a start, middle, and end to tasks.
- Extremely good logical, methodical, and analytical abilities.
- Highly committed and honest.
- Low absence rate.
- Different ways of thinking.



- Tendency towards perfectionism and an interest in doing things the 'right' way.
- High levels of education.
- High levels of focus precision and accuracy in an area of interest.

Tourette's Syndrome:

Tourette's syndrome is **an inherited, neurological condition, the key features of which are tics, involuntary sounds, and movements**. Up to 85% of people with the condition will also experience co-occurring features and conditions.

Potential challenges:

- Find auditory processing difficult.
- Tics can be exacerbated when the individual is stressed or under pressure.
- Tics may change over time and so support will need to be reviewed for the individual.
- May need support to interact with others as they may be embarrassed by their tics.

Potential strengths:

- Can 'hyper focus' so may be able to focus on one task for an extended period of time, however caution should be exercised here.
- The individual may know already what supports them best in situations. Use their knowledge to help you understand.

You should not assume particular associated strengths or difficulties. To unlock a neurodiverse individual's full potential, it is advisable to understand their specific strengths and weaknesses as you would with any employee.



Reasonable Adjustments to Encourage & Support Neurodiversity



Many individuals with neurodiversity will be highly skilled, qualified, and extremely employable. These employees may be able to bring a unique set of skills that are currently lacking in the organisation. However, you may miss out on these skills if you fail to make reasonable adjustments.

Recruitment:

Neurodiverse conditions generally are considered “hidden disabilities” and are often difficult to identify during the recruitment process. On the application form or during the recruitment process, organisations should include a section on disabilities detailing the support on offer. This will encourage candidates to confidently apply for roles and understand that their future potential employer will offer support.

During the application process employers should show an open and positive attitude to diversity and ask candidates if they require any reasonable adjustments during the recruitment process if they have disclosed a neurodiverse condition.



Disclosure:

It is important that your employees and potential employees feel able to, and comfortable with, disclosing information about their neurodiversity. Ways of making an employee comfortable can be anything from letting them know they can do this in your meeting with them, showing them the support you offer, letting them know you are involved in awareness campaigns, or asking employees who already have support in place to be ambassadors.

Disclosure encourages a discussion about employees' strengths and difficulties; it allows employees to talk about any strategies they currently use and any areas where help is needed. It may also be that the current strategies a candidate uses are enough to support them through the recruitment process. It can alleviate workplace-related anxiety and can help raise general awareness about neurodiverse conditions.

The job advert:

- Job adverts are sometimes written in a confusing way; they are not always concise and in plain English. Employers should use short, clear, and concise sentences.
- The advert should list essential skills, avoiding jargon or unnecessary information and be clearly presented, e.g. state if the role requires good verbal or written communication skills, rather than just asking for good communication skills.
- Focus on the exact abilities and experience necessary.
- Try to use pronouns like "we" and "you". Sentences should use the active voice e.g. "Our administration team supports the smooth running of the organisation".
- Avoid passive sentences such as "The smooth running of the organisation is supported by the administration team".
- In the application pack explain reasonable adjustments for the interview and offer the ability to arrange additional reasonable adjustments.

Interviews:

The interview process may not be the best way to assess the ability of a candidate with a neurodiversity condition, especially those with conditions that have short-term (working) memory and sequencing difficulties, difficulties with organisation, listening, and speed of response to questions. Differences in speech may be noticeable e.g. pronunciation/speech disorder (impediment). There may be problems speaking succinctly, and they may participate less, interrupt the interviewer, or find maintaining eye contact difficult.

In order to support a candidate who has a neurodiversity condition, the following can be helpful:

- Be aware of these difficulties and, if possible, avoid using them as criteria for the advertised post.
- Think about what you need the person to be able to do in the role on a day-to-day basis. If excellent communication skills are not a high priority, then consider whether you are looking for these over other necessary skills in the interview.
- Where possible, consider a work trial instead of an interview.
- Interview questions can be adapted; base questions on experience rather than hypothetical situations.
- Be patient and allow extra time to process and respond to questions.
- Limit questions to those that relate to the actual job the candidate will be doing.
- Invite the candidate to bring their own notes for reference to the interview.



In the workplace:

Organisation and time management:

Difficulties with organisation and time management can be associated with all neurodiverse conditions, however these are often seen in individuals with dyslexia and DCD. Difficulties in this area may be evident in a range of tasks, for example, employees may miss appointments, mix up times/place of meeting, miss deadlines, fail to prioritise, have inefficient working methods, appear chaotic and disorganised, have a messy desk, lose things, bring the wrong documents to meetings, and may have problems dealing with a varied workload. This is due to difficulties in auditory short-term memory and sequencing.

Reasonable adjustments include:

- Provide storage solutions—e.g. desk trays/boxes for certain papers, pots to keep stationery organised and tidy. It can help if these are colour coded as well.
- Arrange access to a one-to-one specialist workplace coach.
- Schedule regular one-to-one meetings with line manager to plan workload.
- Help to set mini deadlines, prioritise, order, or list tasks.
- Provide schedules of work in advance, highlighting deadlines, and encourage use of visual weekly/yearly planners and daily/weekly/yearly routines.
- Use/issue smartphones to synchronise documents/calendar etc.
- Support use of online calendar (Google/Outlook) utilising reminder alerts or timers (time to move on to next task).
- Provide tools to help organise paperwork, such as subject dividers or tickler files (a tickler file is a date organised filing system). Colour coding can be done with highlighters or coloured folders.
- Suggest colour coding for in-trays and out-trays.
- Offer technology to organise electronic documents e.g. One note.
- Encourage planning with SMART objectives.

Working memory:

This area of difficulty should be thought of as difficulties with short term memory, rather than long term memory, and is often associated with dyslexia, DCD, and ADHD. This can have an impact on daily activities such as forgetting telephone numbers, messages, instructions, or directions. Also, problems filing, using a directory, carrying out instructions, or following work protocol in the correct order or in a logical way may be observed. Often issues with memory will mean the individual requires information presented several times.

There may be problems with recalling what is said in meetings, minute taking, multi-tasking, listening and reply/formulation and speaking succinctly. Individuals may participate less or interrupt and may miss certain nuances in conversation.

Reasonable adjustments include:

- Demonstrating new tasks (multisensory, hands-on learning and repetition), tell them, show them, then ask them to do the task; also provide the task written down for reference.
- Breaking tasks down into smaller more manageable chunks.
- Trying to provide laminated instructions to help with memory (and keep these near office equipment).
- Giving both verbal and written instructions.
- Providing an alphabet flash card (filing/directory).



- Considering their preferred method of communication and try to utilise this as much as possible.
- Providing a reminder notebook to note down their own bullet points/diagrams/checklist on how to do particular activities.
- Providing templates for taking telephone messages.
- Issuing a digital recorder (minute taking/note taking), or other devices to support note taking e.g. a Smart pen, and allow meetings, where possible, to be recorded.
- Opening meetings with an overview and at the end providing a summary of key/main points.
- Providing written documents prior to meetings/training and encouraging familiarisation before the session.
- Offering your own notes for their reference if you are presenting to employees with neurodiversity.

Literacy:

These difficulties are typically associated with dyslexia, although individuals with DCD may sometimes experience difficulties with spelling or handwriting. Auditory processing and working memory support the tasks and skills required in reading, spelling, and writing. Therefore, when there is a working memory difficulty, as there frequently is in neurodiverse conditions, this results in poor letter/sound knowledge, and difficulty in blending, separating and sequencing sounds within words – for example, spelling words with a missing syllable such as “emidetly” for “immediately” or confusing the word “pacific” with “specific”.

Individuals may have overcome more basic reading difficulties but reading accuracy and comprehension can be affected, for example reading large reports combines basic difficulties of sequencing and working memory, which reduces reading efficiency, making it difficult to extract specific meaning.

Employees may also have difficulty with reading due to visual difficulties (previously referred to as visual stress) – text may appear distorted or to move around the page, words or numbers may be misread, keeping place can be difficult, white “rivers” between the words can distract, and white backgrounds can cause glare for the reader. These difficulties can cause headaches or heavy uncomfortable eyes. Harsh fluorescent lighting can make these problems worse. Individuals may have difficulty obtaining correct data from graphs and charts, the cash register, ruler or tape measure, and inputting data into a computer database. Spelling and punctuation errors are likely to be evident, including forgetting what a word should look like.

Spoken language difficulties can mean problems pronouncing words, word finding difficulties, and problems structuring ideas verbally. Individuals may provide listeners with long-winded repetitive speeches.

Reasonable adjustments for writing, spelling, and organising thoughts into written format include:

- Encouraging your employees to plan written work ahead of time.
- Encouraging construction of ideas using spider diagrams, mind maps, and lists, talking it through and obtaining an overview.
- Providing mind mapping software, e.g. MindView, to help organise and plan ideas.
- Providing a list of appropriate acronyms, abbreviations, and subject-specific vocabulary/key words.
- Providing templates for emails, letters, and reports.
- Suggesting use of mnemonics for regular activities e.g. for taking phone messages, use **P**erson calling, **E**xplanation for call, and **T**elephone number –



- Supporting different methods of producing written documents; mind maps, flow charts, pictures, and diagrams.
- Providing voice recognition software to convert speech into text (e.g. Dragon Naturally Speaking).
- Providing text to speech software (e.g. Texthelp Read and Write Gold) to help identify grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors.
- Providing access to one-to-one software training to raise confidence in using technology.
- Ensuring use of a spell checker and provide a grammar reference book.
- Providing the employee with a notebook to create their own dictionary of correctly spelled words they use regularly.
- Avoiding situations where the employee would be asked to write on a white board or flip chart without prior agreement.

Reasonable adjustments for reading include:

- Providing text to speech software to read documents (e.g. Texthelp Read and Write Gold).
- Providing a scanner for documents to use with text to speech software.
- Providing extra time to read and process large documents.
- Avoiding situations where your employee would be asked to read aloud without prior agreement.
- Being patient and allowing extra time to process and respond to questions.
- Avoiding situations where your employee would be asked to present in front of colleagues without preparation.
- Should they be required to make presentations, then provide training in using PowerPoint or your preferred software.
- Encouraging planning and preparation using mind mapping software such as MindView.
- Ensuring appropriate lighting (avoid fluorescent strip lighting and glare from windows).
- Providing coloured overlays for reading documents. These overlays are also available for computer screens and as reading rulers.
- Suggesting changing the background colour when reading documents on computers.
- Encouraging employees, when reading, to track words with a pen or reading ruler.
- Reading aloud to self may help some people.
- Offering regular breaks.

Presentation:

- Large (12-14) Sans Serif (without flicks or kicks) font, such as Arial.
- No underlining, italics, or block capitals.
- Line spacing – at least 1.5.
- Avoid the use of a white background – off white/pastel is better.

Format:

- Boxes can help separate sections.
- Use colour coding.
- Space out sections.
- Use bullet points or numbering instead of blocks of text.



Style:

- Avoid long dense paragraphs.
- Include only one point per sentence.
- Break up long numbers into chunks of twos or threes.
- Use visual aids in documents and presentations.
- Try less linear presentation of text e.g. table or mind maps.

Tables/graphs:

- Use colours to divide contents.
- Include sharp colour coded lines (table columns/rows; graphs: horizontal/vertical).
- Highlight headings.

Social skills and communication:

Difficulties with social skills are most likely to be present in an individual with an ASC or similar diagnosis. Difficulties include problems organising behaviour and own space (e.g. sitting too close or talking too loudly, not taking turns in conversation). Individuals may feel anxious in groups or unfamiliar surroundings. Some may also experience difficulties with understanding humour and sarcasm or take comments or requests literally. Others may have poor listening skills, may miss non-verbal cues, and consequently appear rude or tactless. Finally, an individual might sometimes have difficulties controlling their emotions.

Employees can often find it difficult to identify and interpret social cues and may not display typical social behaviour. This manifests in different ways but can affect, for example, the person's ability to work with others, follow or give instructions, interact with clients, and build working relationships.

Reasonable adjustments for communication could explore:

- Awareness training for managers and colleagues on ASC in the workplace. An Employment Tribunal for a person with ASC may consider whether a business has put in place awareness training for managers and colleagues on ASC in the workplace. This can help others understand how best to communicate with the individual with ASC and how they may communicate with them.
- Difficulty in the identification and interpretation of social cues, body language and facial expressions. This can lead to significant difficulty in understanding others if they do not communicate their wishes or concerns directly. As a general recommendation, staff must ensure that they are clear and forthright when interacting with employees with ASC using direct communication rather than relying on non-verbal gestures and hints.
- Attending a social skills/teamwork workshop.
- If appropriate, practicing role-play with your employee. This can be done with the support of a workplace coach or coaching strategies taught to the employee.
- Use cues – e.g. the employee could have some standard statements/questions to ask in workplace conversations, such as, “let me know your opinion on this”.
- Consider workspace location: Is their current position the best place for the employee to manage their difficulties?
- If the role involves presentations, offer practice or support around developing confidence in this area. Alternatively, it may be reasonable for that individual not to undertake presentations as part of their role.



Concentration, attention and hyperactivity:

These difficulties are likely to impact an individual with ADHD, however some individuals with dyslexia may have difficulty with concentration, especially in noisier environments. Employees may have difficulty maintaining focus on a task or during a conversation, for example in a meeting. Alternatively, they can become 'hyper focused' on a piece of work or a task or experience confusion when switching their attention between different tasks. Individuals could be easily distracted by their environment (e.g. people chatting; their desk is near the photocopier or fax machine). They may lose their train of thought when writing or speaking and when making a point. They may go off on a tangent or display excessive talking or interruption of others. Their behaviour can seem impulsive or that they are risk-taking. An individual can have great ideas but have difficulty following tasks through to the end. Difficulties with concentrating for verbal instructions and appearing not to listen when spoken to are common as well as losing things required for a task.

Reasonable adjustments include:

- Considering the location of the workspace of the individual – e.g. away from distractions such as noisy equipment, office traffic, and clutter. Consider their preference for music/quiet.
- Allowing flexible hours (they may wish to be in the office at quieter times).
- Setting one task at a time and breaking tasks down into chunks, if possible.
- Encouraging the use of bullet points to summarise points to discuss during a telephone call or in a meeting.
- Allowing reasonable breaks if needed.
- Providing noise cancelling headphones.
- Providing screening with office furniture around the workspace.
- Encouraging the use of a "do not disturb" sign.
- Supporting the employee to identify other sources of distraction and consider how these might be minimised.

Direction and coordination:

Individuals with DCD will have difficulty with coordination and execution of movement as well as experiencing difficulties with their sense of direction. Additionally, some difficulties with sense of direction will be experienced by those with a dyslexic diagnosis due to the impact on their working memory. These difficulties may present themselves with difficulties in managing time and map reading, and individuals may find it difficult to orientate themselves in large (particularly unfamiliar) offices or get lost on the way to new places.

Reasonable adjustments may include:

- Enabling time to spend in an empty office getting used to the geography of the building.
- Encouraging use of computer for recording/taking notes or photocopy your presentation/meeting notes for the individual.
- Using an angle board when working to help with posture and position.
- Offering computerised form completion.
- Considering the workspace used for completing a coordination task – this may be more successful if the individual is sitting or leaning.
- Taping to build up handles on tools/equipment to support grip.
- Ensuring workspace is free from trip hazards.
- Ensuring seating is appropriate.
- Issuing an ergonomic keyboard, large screen, and wireless mouse.
- Encouraging use of keyboard shortcuts.
- Offering the use of the telephone rather than written communication.



Stress and anxiety:

It should be noted that all individuals with neurodiverse conditions can experience stress and anxiety and may in fact be at increased risk due to the extra impact their condition can have.

Reasonable adjustments for anxiety may include:

- Hiring a job coach to help individuals understand why working with other people can create anxiety.
- Creating a routine and a structure for the employee. This can be especially important when the employee starts their role. It's helpful to structure in break and lunch times.
- Having weekly one-to-one meetings at the same time each week. It may be useful to have more one-to-ones than you would with other staff, and this will save you time in the long run. A one-to-one on Monday morning with clear outcomes to be achieved by Friday at 4pm could immensely reduce the anxiety. These targets could even be broken down into daily or hourly targets.
- Managing the employee's weeks with a visual timetable.

Sensory:

Many individuals with ASC experience hypersensitivity (or oversensitivity) to sensory inputs and this can have a significant impact on daily activities in the workplace. Some are hypersensitive to sound and identify this as a major source of anxiety in the workplace. Others can also have difficulty processing large amounts of visual information at once.

Reasonable sensory adjustments include:

- Allocating an employee with a specific workspace for all shifts, e.g. an allocated desk. The employee should be given a choice of the location for the workspace, with the aim of minimising distractions from the sensory environment (e.g. not too close to the fridges or underneath a speaker).
- Allowing an employee to request that the sound level of music (or other background noise) is reduced during their working hours.
- Allowing an employee to work in a quiet room with minimal distractions if they are mainly on the computer.

