

# How do we make sure our workplaces are neuro-inclusive in 2021?

Change can disrupt the coping strategies that enable a neurodivergent worker to do the things that many of us take for granted. These strategies are typically built up over a period of time and are very specific to their job and environment. In a time of change, these strategies are likely to be thrown up in the air causing stress and lower productivity until the individual is able to reset. In this article, we share more about some of the common neurodiverse conditions, the key considerations, and what some employers may choose to do next if they want to explore this further in their workplace. Let's start this tour of the subject with defining 'neurodiversity'.

As one in eight individuals currently working today has a neurodivergent condition, it is quite probable that many of us have an affected colleague (Kirby, 2021a). Yet how neuro-inclusive are our workplaces right now? Just one in 10 employers considered neurodiversity in their people management practices before the pandemic (CIPD, 2018), so it is likely that reduced visibility of neurodivergent remote workers has left their needs even further down a pressured HR or management agenda.



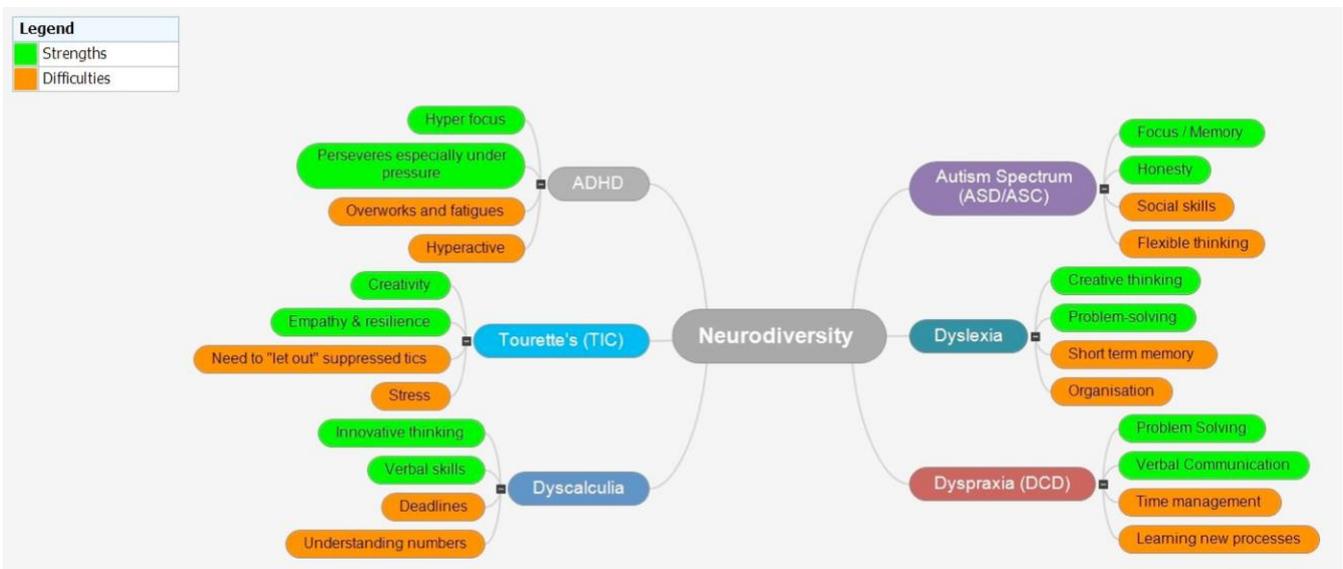
1963 Ferrari 250 GTO

Would you use this Ferrari to plough a field? If you did, it probably wouldn't win many races for you! So, let's look at this significant group of workers and why we would all benefit from for special consideration of their needs.

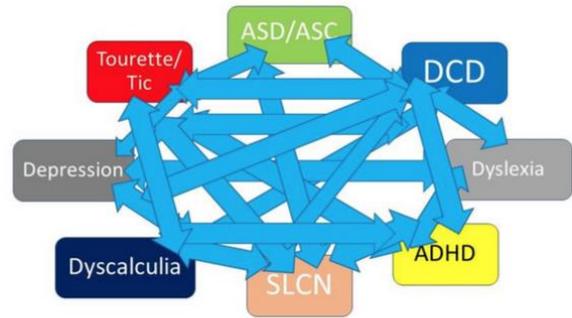
## What is neurodiversity and what is its impact on individuals?

"[Neurodiversity encompasses] *alternative thinking styles including dyslexia, autism, ADHD and dyspraxia...* Neurodiversity is, ultimately, a biological fact of the infinite variety of human neurocognition. Now, the same term 'neurodiversity' is also being used to represent a fast-growing sub-category of organisational diversity and inclusion that seeks to embrace and maximise the talents of people who think differently." CIPD 2018

We all have different wiring, neurodiversity describes the natural variations of the human brain; a cornucopia of differences in the way we think, process, behave, function, cope and perceive. Recent Cambridge University research found our neurobiology and the patterns of our brain wiring can influence whether we experience differing thinking styles (Whittaker, 2021). The underlying causes of particular conditions are biological with several common brain patterns linked with various strengths and difficulties. The diagram below gives a precis of some strengths and difficulties that might be observed in the workplace.



*“ADHD: The entrepreneur’s superpower’ cited ADHDer traits as including ability to focus for extended periods, multitasking and being calm under pressure: all valuable skills for employees within organisations, not just when starting a company. The capacity of dyslexic and dyspraxic people to ‘think outside the box’ – often a much-desired quality of an individual employee, or team – is also highly valuable. Autistic people, too, are proven to be successful in a variety of roles, often bringing strengths to their work such as analytical thinking, focus, and attention to detail.” Forbes, 2014*



Co-occurring conditions

Many neurodivergent workers may choose not to disclose their condition which can make it extra difficult to navigate and support. It can be useful to ask open questions to all members of a team to determine whether there is anything they need to help them feel more productive or to function better in a hybrid environment.



Dyslexic brain bookshelf

How issues manifest in the workplace can be varied. It can be common for a person with dyslexia to have difficulties retaining things in their short-term memory. If you think about it in terms of a bookshelf, many dyslexic individuals can only hold a small number of items on their short-term memory shelf. As soon as they reach their limit of say three items, the first item is likely to fall off. This then takes a huge amount of mental energy and stress to recover this item. In comparison a more neuro-typical individual can hold 7 to 10 things in their short-term memory. The dyslexic person therefore benefits from easy access tools to help them record information quickly. Yes, a good old-fashioned notebook may do nicely, but in a hybrid world of moving between home and workplace, you can guarantee you’ve left it somewhere that you currently are not!

Co-occurrence is common. Professor Amanda Kirby recently shared with us that *“if someone has one of these thinking patterns, they are quite likely to also have traits of a second or third condition; depression can appear alongside many of these conditions too. If you’ve met one person who identifies as neurodivergent, then you have met one person. In a way, these conditions impact are unique to each person”*. As a result, it’s sensible to take a person-centred approach; to understand each individual’s specific needs, amplify strengths, manage difficulties and avoid making assumptions.

### What are our responsibilities as an employer?

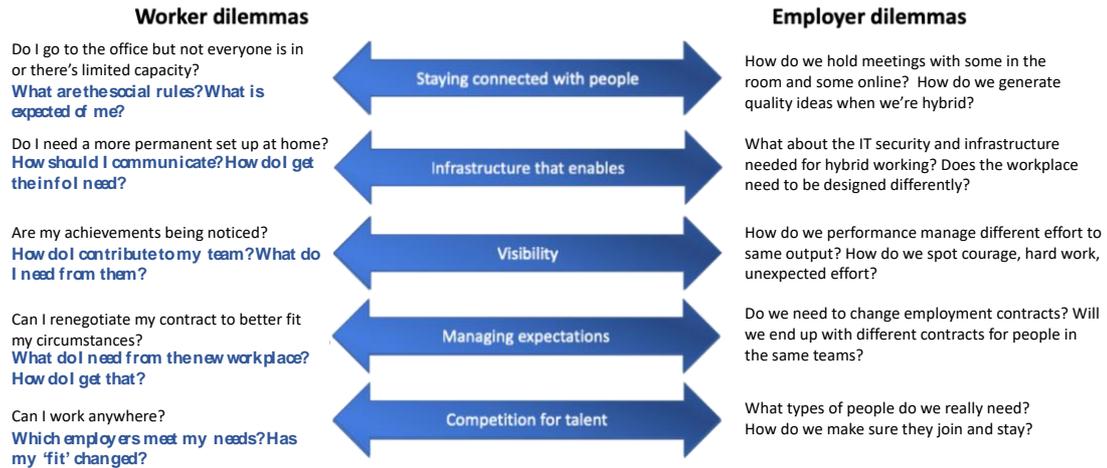
As an employer, you have a duty of care to some neurodivergent workers who have additional protection under the Equality Act 2010. This Act states *‘you are disabled under the Equality Act 2010 if you have a physical or mental impairment that has a ‘substantial’ and ‘long-term’ negative effect on your ability to do your normal daily activities’* (see [here](#)). Neurodivergent conditions can be lifelong and cause substantial problems with completing everyday work tasks. An employer’s responsibility is to provide reasonable adjustments to support daily activities.

### So, what have been the emerging issues from the pandemic for neurodivergent people?

To explore the impact of the pandemic, we have grouped the changes into five key areas based on ongoing research which has involved numerous Cambridge Network members over the last year.

#### 1. Staying connected with people

One of the positives of working remotely in the last year has been that for many of us we have felt more productive with our time. We’ve been more efficient not just because we have cut out the commute, but we also have had a clearer view of where our time is being spent. Actually, many of us now seem to fear a drop of that productivity as we go back to a workplace and face ‘interruptions’ from colleagues. Many Cambridge employers therefore report they are expecting to implement a hybrid solution of some form moving forward: partial working from home, some time in the office. This compromise seems to work for many of us. But not necessarily all.



*Workplace issues emerging from the pandemic (questions from neurodivergent workers in blue)*

Both introverts and neurodivergent workers report one of the joys of lockdown has been to focus and concentrate in a quiet working space. This is almost a reverse of the office trend in recent years towards open plan which sought to enable creative thinking and interaction. Unfortunately, these open plan spaces can be very challenging if you're easily distracted by noise, movement and conversations.

As we move back to a potentially more office-based environment again, there can be a sense of social anxiety. Whilst many of us may be wondering about capacity issues at work, the neurodivergent worker is also likely to be wondering 'what are the social rules? What is expected of me?' A lack of clarity around those rules may create anxiety around simple things like moving around the office, whether to wear a mask, elbow-bump, or who to ask questions when there are problems. Some workers may therefore benefit from quiet working spaces in the office that can be adapted to their needs as well as coaching to help rebuild their coping strategies in line with new social norms. Some teams may also benefit from neurodiversity awareness training, so they are aware of the issues around re-entry.

## 2. Infrastructure that enables

As the 'mass forced experiment' of remote working took hold, we all had to muddle through in whatever boat we found ourselves in. People were using ironing boards as desks, headsets went out of stock along with the hair clippers. At the same time, some neurodivergent workers were finding it difficult to adapt to home working, communicating with others was a particular problem for some. However, the setup has gradually become much more optimised and comfortable, with a personalised workspace at home and suitable communication tools.

Going back to a workplace, especially in a hybrid way, poses new communication challenges. A neurodivergent worker is likely to be asking 'how should I communicate? How do I get the information I need? How do I make my tools work for me wherever I'm working?' They may benefit from a workplace needs assessment for the combination of work and home. This assessment will help the individual and their manager to understand the needs of their role and their personal needs and what reasonable adjustments can be made to meet these. Cloud based apps, assistive technology and lightweight hardware may be some reasonable adjustments.

## 3. Visibility

If people are not visible to us, we have less information about what they are doing or how they are feeling because we lack organic conversation. As remote working continues into the medium term, many of us are experiencing an information erosion - we become a bit blind to what is happening in our organisation. In this environment, there is a risk of unconscious bias as we have reduced information about each other and can be quick to make assumptions. This can affect how we rate each other in many ways, including work performance.

But what are the implications for those who are neurodivergent? They can be adversely affected by poor visibility because they may work longer, take fewer breaks, and may not ask for support as readily as others. Their additional effort and energy put in to achieve comparable tasks is not visible. In an environment where they are less able to observe others, they have less information to make a judgement about expected performance. They may therefore benefit from an explicit discussion with their manager and colleagues around 'How do I contribute to this team? What is the most important thing that I can do right now?'

#### 4. Diversity of expectations

There has been a huge difference in people's journeys over the last year. Have you heard any worker honestly say they want to go back to the way things were for them a year ago? *'I'll maybe work two days a week in the office and three at home'. 'I'll commute to London once a week, but no way am I going back to doing that every day'. 'I want no-meeting Fridays'*. We all have slightly different plans. At the same time, a growing list of employers is expecting people back in the workplace full time.

The reality for many of us is that how and where we work depends on what is agreed informally amongst our teams. Our social get togethers, formal meetings and general presence in the office is mostly dictated at a team level. We may even negotiate who is in the office to balance capacity and social distancing. So, what are likely to be the expectations of neurodivergent workers? The challenge for neurodivergent individuals is to negotiate and flex with colleagues. For some, the nuances of people's requests for flexibility may not be obvious.

Any neurodivergent worker, and those working with them, may benefit from making requests explicit. A good way to look at this effectively as a team is through a 'team reset' workshop. Such a workshop helps the team put together a team agreement - responsibilities, team processes, expected behaviours - to help the team perform in the new context with shared understanding and expectations. Depending on the level of shake up in your organisation resulting from the pandemic, those teams who have been more affected may also want to explore reshaping the team and its activities so that people are in the right roles based on skills and needs.

#### 5. Talent and brand

We predict there will be a shift in the workforce over the next two years with people moving to employers that offer a better 'fit' for their circumstances and preferences. Some workers want to be in the workplace five days a week; others want to be hybrid or completely at home. For employers, knowing and communicating your deal is key in this shifting market. You may find you want to do some internal market research to understand who you have and where your talented people sit. Given neurodivergent workers bring some particular strengths, it is likely you may want to consider them as a particular workforce segment in your Talent Management strategy.

Being known to be neuro-inclusive will matter. They may well already be asking themselves *'Which employers meet my needs? Has my 'fit' changed?'* So, what does a great employer do for neurodivergent workers? They think through the employee lifecycle and consider this diverse group's needs at every stage:

- processes at recruitment enable workers to demonstrate their strengths and awareness of their weaknesses
- appropriate performance targets that recognise neurodivergent ways of working and offer clarity around what is needed with regular feedback
- strengths based recognition and reward, such as contributions to problem solving or decision making
- enabling job design and team working
- mentoring and coaching to make the most of their style
- developing their strengths to full potential
- leadership and culture that promotes inclusiveness

#### Next steps

If you are early on this journey, you may want to reflect on where your organisation is in terms of its maturity towards neuro-inclusion both in 'normal' times and during the pandemic:

- *No awareness:* People don't explicitly consider issues that affect neurodiverse colleagues and may not even have a working definition
- *Awareness:* There is awareness at all levels of the organisation around the challenges colleagues may have who are neurodiverse, possibly with some supportive equipment or software made available
- *Adoption:* Adopted some processes to ensure there is no negative discrimination against those who are neurodiverse, such as extra consideration paid in interviews
- *Adaption:* Explicit signs that organisation is adapting to a range of preferences including varied physical workspaces, quiet zones, etc
- *Absorption:* Evidence gathered to ensure neurodivergent people have equivalent experience to other employees, such as measurably fair career progression

If you consider yourself a Neuro-inclusive employer that has adapted or absorbed neurodiversity into your workplace, we strongly recommend you shout from the rooftops! It's a great time to promote what you're doing; it will certainly make your organisation a place many people will want to work.

## How we can help

If you have any questions or would like some help, then please get in contact with us. We can help with:

### Individual support such as

- Coping strategy coaching
- Assistive Technology training
- Individual Workplace Needs assessments

### Team support such as

- 'Team reset' assessments
- 'Team reset' workshops or coaching

### Employer

- Talent Management consulting
- Reputation and brand building
- Policy and Practice review

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