



Pearn Kandola Research

Neurodiversity At Work

(2024)

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Introduction

Neurodiversity describes the difference in how the human brain works. The term neurodivergent is used to refer to individuals who process information differently to those considered “typical” or “neurotypical” (*The Happiness Index, 2023*). This term is commonly used to describe those with ADHD, Autism spectrum disorder and dyslexia alongside other forms of neurodiversity.

It is estimated that 15-20% of the population is neurodivergent (Doyle, 2020) and the same proportion could be expected to be found in the workforce. Unfortunately, they do not feel included in the workplace with 20% having faced discrimination and harassment at work (CIPD, 2024) and half of leaders stated that they would not employ a neurodivergent individual (*Institute of Leadership, 2020*). These findings suggest there is a clear bias against neurodivergent individuals potentially based on a lack of understanding. Additionally, a review by Doyle & McDowall (2021) suggested more research is needed to provide practical guidance for employers to support neurodiversity inclusion.

Our research aims to shine a light on the experiences of neurodivergent employees working in the UK, highlighting barriers that exist, day-to-day experiences, and where organisations need to do more to promote an inclusive workplace. We also aim to highlight and share good practices.



Approach

Our sample

A total of

601

participants took part in the research.

To be eligible to take part in the study, participants needed to be: neurodivergent; employed; and living and working in the UK. The survey was distributed by the online platform Prolific, reaching people from a range of demographic backgrounds. Each participant was paid for their time.

The sample consisted of

311 women	272 men	15 identifying as non-binary	3 preferring not to state gender
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Participants in the sample consisted of

White (n=520)	Black (n=19)	Asian (n=23)	Mixed (n=31)	Other ethnicities (n=8)
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Our primary focus was on reaching working individuals who were neurodivergent, which constrained the representation of other backgrounds. Participants were aged

18-24 (n=56)	25-34 (n=263)	35-44 (n=163)	45-54 (n=84)	55-64 (n=35)
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Self-reported neurodivergence was categorised as

Dyscalculia (n=24)	Dysgraphia (n=3)	Dyslexia (n=182)	Dyspraxia (n=44)
Autism (n=230)	ADHD (n=276)	Tourette syndrome (n=4)	Other (n=30)

What we measured

Respondents were asked a range of open and closed questions about their experience of being neurodivergent. Individuals were asked to draw on their current or past real-life experiences rather than responding hypothetically.

Our survey covered the following areas:

- **Applying for roles:** Individuals' experiences of the recruitment process and what had encouraged and discouraged individuals applying for roles in the past.
- **Disclosure:** The extent to which people disclose they are neurodivergent, experiences of disclosure and what encouraged or discouraged this.
- **Adjustments:** The extent to which people are getting the support they need from their employer to perform effectively in their role.
- **Experiences of inclusion:** Exploring if individuals feel included at work and whether they need to mask.



Applying for roles

Fairness in applying for roles

Participants were asked if they believed recruitment processes were fair to neurodivergent candidates. 16% of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that processes were fair whilst 48% strongly disagreed or disagreed that processes were fair (see figure 1 for a full breakdown of responses).

Recruitment processes are fair to ND candidates

3%
Strongly agree

13%
Agree

36%
Neither agree or disagree

35%
Disagree

13%
Strongly disagree

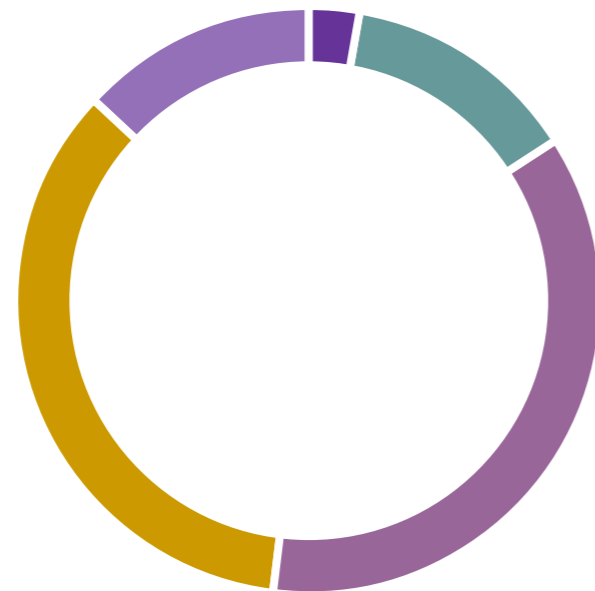


Figure 1. Perceived fairness in recruitment processes.

Why are recruitment processes fair or unfair?

Respondents were asked to explain why they believed recruitment processes were fair or unfair based on their response to the previous question.

The top reasons which led respondents to believe recruitment processes were fair are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Why recruitment processes are perceived as fair

Employers provide the necessary support – Adjustments are in place to support neurodivergent candidates

Experienced no issues – Not previously experienced any issues to question the fairness of application processes

There is a better understanding of neurodivergence – Employers are doing more to learn more about the topic of neurodiversity

Processes are fair – The way recruitment processes have been designed is to find the best candidate for the role

No need for special treatment – The process shouldn't give anyone preferential treatment and should be based on merit only

The top reasons which led respondents to believe recruitment processes were unfair are presented in table 2.

Table 2. Why recruitment processes are perceived as unfair

Bias and negative attitudes – Stigma and a lack of understanding about neurodivergence is affecting decision making

Neurodivergent candidates struggle with interviews – Interviews can be stressful and difficult especially when requiring candidates to provide an answer on the spot

Recruitment processes are designed based on neurotypical assumptions – The process is not designed with neurodivergence in mind and in some cases weighted against neurodivergent traits

Application processes can be difficult and unclear – The process can be long and confusing with not enough information about what each stage entails

Employers do not always offer reasonable adjustments – Adjustments are not always offered or accepted putting some candidates at a disadvantage

These findings show that although some organisations have a better understanding of neurodivergence and are providing the adjustments needed this still isn't universally the case. The results show that bias is affecting the recruitment process, and many talented candidates may be overlooked due to negative attitudes.

What signals that an employer is *inclusive* for neurodivergent employees?

Respondents were asked to share examples of indicators they noticed when applying for jobs that have suggested to them that an employer was either inclusive or not towards neurodivergence.

The number one signifier was mentioning neurodivergence on the application form, in job adverts and in other recruitment materials. Where this occurred, they believed organisations were more likely to be supportive.

Asking candidates about the adjustments they needed was the second largest signifier as this indicated to candidates that they were likely to get the support they needed.

The third largest signifier of an inclusive organisation was how other candidates and employees had been treated by the organisation they applied for. Candidates were taking the time to research organisations and rely on other people's experiences as an indicator of inclusivity.

The other most common themes are presented in Table 3 in order of frequency.

The number one signifier was mentioning neurodivergence on the application form.



Table 3. What signals an employer is inclusive?

Actively mentioning neurodivergence – Describing themselves as neurodivergent inclusive, explicitly mentioning neurodivergence on adverts and other materials

Actively asking what adjustments are needed – Proactively asking candidates what support they need

Other's experiences of the organisation – Hearing positive stories from other employees or looking online for reviews of the organisation

Highlighting disability awareness – Having disability accreditations or explicit statements around disability inclusion

Cues on the website – Checking company webpages for signals of inclusivity e.g., D&I statements & dedicated webpages

Welcoming diverse candidates to apply – Explicitly stating diverse candidates and neurodivergent candidates are welcome to apply

Showing an interest in neurodivergence – Asking questions and trying to understand more about neurodiversity

Advertising they are inclusive – Emphasising inclusivity in adverts or mentioning it in interviews

Having diversity among staff – Visibly seeing diversity either on websites or during the recruitment process e.g., during interviews or going into the office

Published diversity & inclusion policies and practices – Visible policies and practices that highlights efforts to be a diverse and inclusive organisation

Actively stating they offer adjustments – Having a statement that clearly indicates adjustments will be offered



What signals that an employer is *less inclusive* for neurodivergent employees?

Failing to mention neurodivergence was the largest signal of a less inclusive employer. It suggested that it was not something organisations had considered when creating job adverts but also generally within the organisation.

Furthermore, not offering adjustments was another indicator that an organisation was less inclusive. This was a signal to some participants that the organisation may not be willing to make the adjustments they need.

The other most common themes are presented in Table 4 in order of frequency.

Table 4. What signals a less inclusive employer?

No mention of neurodivergence – Providing no information about neurodivergence and making no reference to it on any attraction materials

Not offering adjustments – No option to ask for adjustments in the recruitment process or not mentioning any support that can be offered

Negative opinions and judgement about neurodivergence – Employers showing a lack of understanding around neurodivergence and/or expressing negative comments

Lack of flexibility – Not being flexible to different approaches, e.g., working hours and work environment

No mention of D&I – Seeing no mention of diversity and inclusion on job adverts or having no clear policies relating to this

Lack of clear guidance/info about what the recruitment process entails – Employers not providing clarity or relevant information during the application stage e.g., no information on timescales and steps involved

Other's experiences – Other's negative experiences of the organisation either shared informally or online

Recruitment design – Poorly written job adverts or long recruitment processes with unnecessary criteria

Language used – Using certain terms such as “fast paced”, “dynamic” or “team player” in job adverts

Summary of findings

The findings show that just under half (48%) of neurodivergent candidates do not find recruitment processes fair. The top reasons for this were bias and negative attitudes held by employers, struggling with interviews and the design of the recruitment process being based on neurotypical assumptions.

What does this mean?

This suggests that organisations may be penalising neurodivergent candidates based on poor recruitment design. Furthermore, with bias being the main concern for neurodivergent employees, organisations should seek to understand where bias may be present in their recruitment processes and consider training hiring managers on how this may manifest.

Respondents demonstrated how organisations are sending signals to them in their recruitment materials. The findings emphasised the importance of mentioning neurodivergence in recruitment materials and asking candidates what adjustments are needed. The findings also show the impact of others' experiences of working for or applying to the organisation has on their perceptions of inclusion.

Disclosure

Rates of disclosure

Overall, 69% of individuals in our sample had disclosed to someone that they were neurodivergent at work. However, disclosure can take many forms. When respondents were asked who they had disclosed to:

- 51% of respondents had disclosed to their employer (i.e. their organisation).
- 56% of respondents had disclosed to their manager.
- 49% of respondents had disclosed to their team.

The results show respondents were more likely to disclose to their manager, than to their other colleagues or employer at work, however only around half of respondents disclosed to each of these groups. A breakdown of the responses can be seen in figure 2.



I have disclosed to my current employer

49%

I have disclosed

51%

I have not disclosed



I have disclosed to my current line manager

44%

I have disclosed

56%

I have not disclosed



I have disclosed to my team

51%

I have disclosed

49%

I have not disclosed



Figure 2. Disclosure rates to employer, manager and team.



Experiences of disclosing

From the sample who had disclosed at work, 66% stated their experience of disclosure was either very positive or positive, whilst 26% was neutral and 8% had either a negative or very negative experience (see figure 3).

If you have disclosed to your employer how was your experience?

28%
Very positive

38%
Positive

26%
Neutral

6%
Negative

2%
Very negative

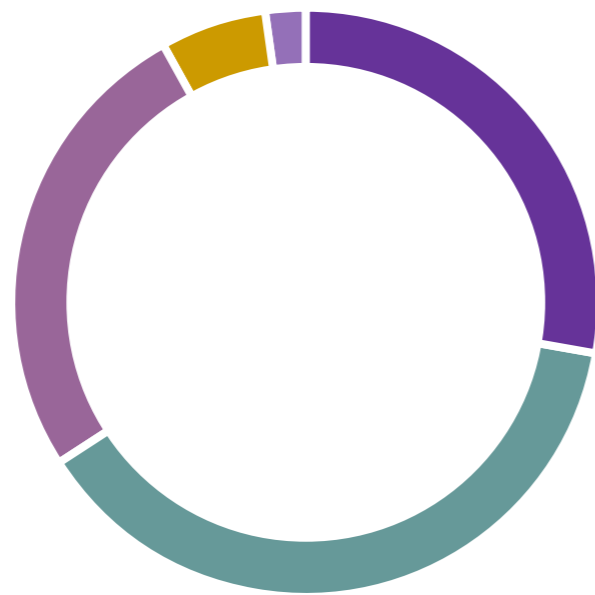


Figure 3. Experiences of disclosure.

What can encourage disclosure?

We investigated the actions organisations had taken that had previously encouraged or discouraged individuals to disclose to their current or previous employer. It is important to note that the choice to disclose is a personal decision and not something every individual will wish to do. However, organisations have a role to ensure they are creating an inclusive environment where individuals who wish to disclose feel safe and confident to do so.

The largest response to the question was that there was nothing an organisation could do. The reason for this was that some wanted to disclose regardless whilst others did not want to disclose so could not be encouraged by any actions. The other most common actions organisations took to encourage disclosure were offering adjustments and explicitly asking employees to disclose.

Below are the most common actions that encouraged respondents to disclose they are neurodivergent.

Table 5. What can encourage disclosure?

Nothing – Not feeling comfortable to do so, fear of discrimination, wanting to keep this private

Offering/providing adjustments – Stating adjustments can be made to put support in place

Allowing/asking for disclosure – Giving candidates/employees the option to disclose e.g., on application forms, asking in interviews, conversations with managers

Being understanding and supportive – Managers and colleagues showing empathy and support when discussing disclosure

Guaranteed interview – Offering the guaranteed interview scheme

The choice to disclose is a personal decision and not something every individual will wish to do.



What can discourage disclosure?

The most common reason respondents were discouraged from disclosing was that they feared it may impact their chance of getting the job they had applied for. Similarly, the other top reasons that discouraged disclosure were fear of bias and not wanting to be treated differently.

These findings suggest that neurodivergent employees are fearful of the impact disclosure may have on them finding work or advancing within their careers. This suggests that organisations are not doing enough to reassure employees that disclosure will not have a negative impact on decisions relating to their career.

Below are the most common reasons that discouraged respondents to disclose they are neurodivergent.

Table 6. What can discourage disclosure?

Fear it may impact chance of getting the job – Concern that disclosure will reflect negatively on job applications or promotions

Bias and stigma – Fear of stigma or stereotypes that exist about neurodivergence

Not wanting to be treated differently – Worry that once others know they are neurodivergent they will start to treat them either unfairly or negatively

Fear of judgement – Concern about being judged in a negative way based on other's assumptions of neurodivergence

Nothing – Never been discouraged based on organisations actions

Neurodivergent employees are fearful of the impact disclosure may have on them.

Summary of results

69% of employees have disclosed to someone they are neurodivergent at work and are more likely to disclose to their manager than their employer or team.

Only 8% of employees who had disclosed had a negative experience doing so whilst 66% had a positive experience.

The main actions organisations had taken to encourage disclosure were offering or providing adjustments and proactively allowing/asking employees to disclose.

The main reasons why employees were discouraged from disclosing included fear it may impact their chance of getting the job, bias and not wanting to be treated differently.



Adjustments

Are employees receiving the adjustments that they need?

Out of the sample, only 60% of respondents reported receiving the adjustments they needed. This equates to over 1 in 3 respondents not receiving the adjustments they need to perform their role (Figure 4).

Does your employer provide the reasonable adjustments that you need?



Figure 4. Are employers providing adjustments.

Are employees comfortable asking for the support they need?

36% of respondents indicated that they were comfortable or very comfortable to ask for adjustments at work whilst 42% were uncomfortable or very uncomfortable (see figure 5).

How comfortable do you feel to ask for adjustments at work?

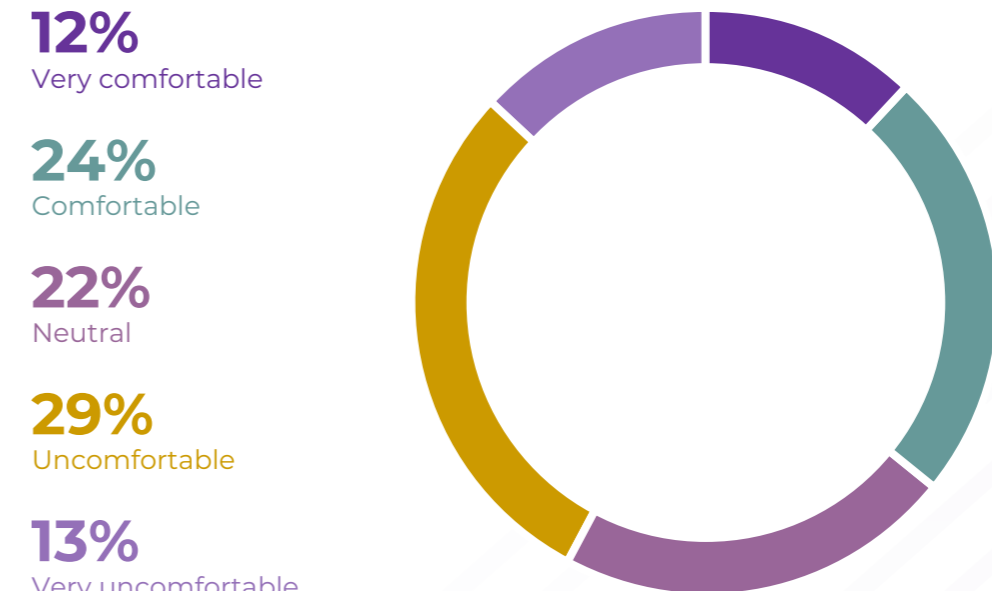


Figure 5. Comfort in asking for support.

The findings suggest that organisations could be doing more to provide employees the opportunity to ask for the support they need. In particular, creating psychologically safe environments where employees can request support without fear of judgement or negative consequences.



What adjustments are needed for your role?

The most common adjustments needed were extra time, being able to work from home and having access to a quiet workspace. The findings suggested that the support employees needed was often related to flexibility and being able to control and decide how they worked best. Many of the adjustments that respondents mentioned would benefit all employees such as quiet areas in an office or the ability to take breaks in the day.

Table 7. The most common adjustments needed

Extra time – Having additional time to process information or complete tasks

Flexible work location – Being able to work from home when required

Having a quiet workspace – Having access to a workspace with less noise to help concentration and reduce overstimulation

Flexible working hours – Flexibility to schedule day around individual needs

Breaks during the day – Regular breaks when needed

Many of the adjustments that respondents mentioned would benefit all employees.

Summary of findings

- Over 1 in 3 respondents are not receiving the adjustments they need to perform their role.
- Over 1 in 3 respondents do not feel comfortable asking for the support they need
- The most common adjustments needed were extra time for tasks, the option to work from home and having access to a quiet workspace.
- Organisations should be doing more to create psychologically safe spaces for employees to speak openly about the support they need.



Inclusion and masking at work

Feelings of inclusion

Most respondents (76%) indicated that they feel included at work, 10% indicated that they did not feel included at work and 14% responded neutrally (see figure 6).

I feel included

29%
Strongly agree

47%
Agree

14%
Neither agree nor disagree

8%
Disagree

2%
Strongly disagree

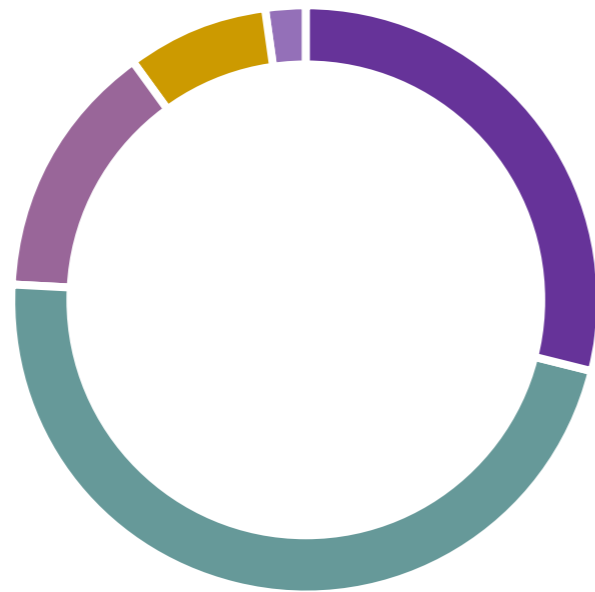


Figure 6. Feelings of inclusion.

Examples of inclusion

To understand respondents' experiences of inclusion and exclusion at work we asked if they could provide examples of what someone at work had done to make them feel included or excluded at work.

The most common actions other employees had done to make respondents feel included were:

Table 8. The most common examples of inclusive actions

Including me in social events – Invited to events that take place outside of work e.g., drinks after work or birthday parties

Checked in on me – Others asking respondents how they were doing generally or reaching out when they could see they were struggling

Treated me the same as everyone else – Receiving equal treatment and not made to feel different

Offering support or adjustments – Others proactively asking if support is needed or if any adjustments can be put in place

Asked my opinion – Colleagues asking for advice about work or encouraging contributions in meetings

Examples of exclusion

The most common actions other employees had done to make respondents feel excluded were:

Table 9. The most common examples of exclusion

Being excluded from social events – Not invited to social events taking place that other colleagues are attending

Being ignored – Others not engaging in conversations or ignoring comments made

Dismissed my individual needs or request for support – Others ignoring requests made to work in a more productive way e.g., adjusting brightness in the room

Not invited to meetings that are relevant – Being excluded from meetings or discussions about work that is directly relevant to their role

Expressing negative views about neurodivergence – Colleagues expressing inappropriate and hurtful comments about different forms of neurodivergence



Masking

Respondents were asked whether they hide emotions, discomfort, or thoughts relating to being neurodivergent at work otherwise referred to as “Masking”. 63% responded that they had done this at work.

Have you masked at work?



Figure 7. Masking at work.

Respondents who had masked at work were asked to explain the impact this has on them.

The most common impact masking had can be seen in table 10:

Table 10. The impact of masking

Anxiety and stress – Feeling worried and nervous building up to more intense feelings of stress and anxiety about how to behave at work

Exhaustion and fatigue – Having to act in a different way to their usual behaviour made respondents feel drained and exhausted

Little/no impact – Having adapted to masking over a long period of time the impact this had was reduced

Frustration – Internal frustration at self for being different or having to mask

Declined mental health – Struggling mentally, in some cases resulting in breakdowns or depression

The findings suggest that masking has a considerably negative impact on employees. Furthermore, it is likely that the most common outcomes i.e., anxiety, stress and fatigue are likely to be affecting their self-confidence at work as well as their performance.

Summary of results

Just over $\frac{3}{4}$ of neurodivergent employees feel included at work.

Examples of what colleagues did to make them feel included were: including them in social events, checking in on them and treating them the same as others.

The most common ways employees have felt excluded were: being excluded from social events, being ignored and others dismissing their requests for support.

63% of employees feel they need to mask at work and the impact of this includes anxiety, stress and fatigue.

Recommendations



1

> Develop understanding of neurodivergence.

The findings highlighted a lack of understanding of neurodivergence, contributing to negative attitudes and bias. Organisations should raise awareness internally to support existing neurodivergent employees as well as specifically training hiring managers to prevent unconscious bias from affecting decision making.

2

> Take an active approach to offering support and adjustments.

Ensure candidates can request adjustments during the recruitment process starting from the application form. Clearly communicate what support is available and highlight previous support examples.

3

> Mention inclusion policies in attraction materials.

To attract neurodivergent staff clearly state key inclusion policies especially those relating to neurodivergence.

4

> Review recruitment processes.

Review your recruitment process and consider if it is providing fair opportunities for neurodivergent candidates. Examine the candidate experience to ensure it's providing a positive experience for candidates and signalling an inclusive environment.

5

> Build psychological safety.

Not every neurodivergent employee will feel comfortable to disclose or ask for support. Therefore, it is the role of organisations to create safe spaces for neurodivergent employees to feel comfortable disclosing their needs and asking for support.

Difference inspires business

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