

Neurodiversity Celebration Week 2024

18 to 24 March 2024 is Neurodiversity Celebration Week. Founded in 2018, it aims to challenge stereotypes about neurodiversity and create more inclusive environments for neurodivergent individuals.

“Neurodiversity” refers to the different ways a person’s brain processes information and incorporates thinking styles, such as dyslexia, dyspraxia, autism and ADHD. It is now widely accepted that having a diverse workforce has untold positive benefits and the same is as true of neurodivergence as it is with other characteristics.

In the workplace, employers often approach neurodiversity through the lens of the Equality Act 2010, and the law as it relates to disabilities (i.e., a mental impairment that has a substantial (meaning more than trivial), adverse and long-term effect on an individual’s ability to carry out normal day to day activities). While neurodivergence should not be seen as a deficiency, this approach is usually correct as a matter of law, and allows neurodivergent individuals additional protections in the workplace. However, recognising this on its own is not enough to create inclusive working environments for employees who are neurodiverse.

So what more should employers be doing?

At the outset, an important point to be aware of is language.

Often, neurodiversity is described as a “hidden disability”, so called because it is not always obvious on sight. Although this may be done with good intentions, the language is arguably exclusionary.

The word “hidden” could suggest there is something deceptive, that individuals are deliberately keeping their neurodiversity a secret. It also suggests that these conditions should not be discussed when in fact the opposite is true.

Better terminology is that these are “invisible” conditions.

Conversation and flexibility are key. Different people have different communication styles and preferences, and the same person can have different preferences in different situations. A key part of creating a safer and more inclusive workplace is not to make assumptions about what a person with a particular thinking style needs, but to ask them what they need, when they need it and work with them to implement it. This can only be done effectively if managers are given appropriate training in understanding differences in communication styles and how to communicate in a neuro-inclusive manner.

Sometimes, employers may feel confused and even burdened by the duty to make reasonable adjustments. This does not need to be the case. This duty is not supposed to be a shackle for employers, it is supposed to be a positive action, a way of giving some extra help to enable employees to do their job to the best of their ability (which benefits the employer). Crucially, the requirement is to do what is “reasonable” in all the circumstances. If the narrative around the duty to make reasonable adjustments changes, more neurodiverse employees will feel comfortable discussing their status with

their employer and asking for what they need to alleviate the disadvantage they are experiencing. Some adjustments will be straightforward, such as using neurodiverse friendly formatting in all written communications as standard. Some will admittedly take more resources, such as offering specialist coaching and training. However, the aim of all adjustments is to encourage greater participation in the workforce and neurodiversity should be valued alongside other forms of diversity.

Once an employer is open to making these cultural changes, it can then put in place practical measures to make that a reality.

Disability networks and champions are an obvious place to start, making sure there is a person or group of people responsible for driving change. Providing the contact details of this person/group as part of the application process and encouraging neurodiverse candidates to contact them demonstrates a safe and inclusive workplace from the outset and reduces the chance of an employer losing out on high quality candidates for lack of information on the support available.

The traditional recruitment process of written application forms followed by verbal interviews can be exclusionary. Instead, an employer should stand back and think about what skills candidates need to be able to do the job effectively. It should then think of the different ways in which candidates can demonstrate those skills and tailor the recruitment process accordingly.

A similar process can be undertaken in respect of performance

reviews. Technology can help here, for example if high quality written work is an occupational requirement, that does not necessarily need to be demonstrated by typing: dictation software could be used instead.

The most important thing is to involve employees in the process. If the culture is one where employees can ask for what they need and explain why, employers and employees will be able to work together to everyone's benefit. By embracing neurodivergence, employers can bring extra creativity, different perspectives and expertise to the workplace, as well as significant organisational benefits such as enhanced diversity of thought, improved innovation, better processes and a richer pool of talent.

Embracing neurodiversity is vital for the future of work – employees may feel marginalised by workplace cultures, processes and technology that fails to consider their thinking styles. By adopting more inclusive hiring practices, providing reasonable adjustments and encouraging awareness of neurodiversity throughout the workplace, employers can ensure their organisation doesn't get left behind.

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