

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Supporting Neurodiversity at Work

The neurodiversity movement has been growing in strength in recent years, prompting many workplaces to look at how to best support employees who are neurodivergent.

A neurodivergent person is an individual whose brain functions and processes information differently than the majority of society—sometimes referred to as the neurotypical population. These people may have one or more conditions including dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), autism, and Tourette's syndrome.

The neurodiversity movement advocates for neurodivergent people and helps foster an understanding of their unique skills and strengths in all aspects of their lives.

The benefits of neurodiversity at work

Whether you realize it or not, it is highly likely that your organization already has a neurodiverse workforce. Experts believe that at least 1 in 6 people (about 15 percent of the population) is neurodivergent, so there's a good chance that you work closely with someone who is neurodivergent.

When managers and employees become more aware of neurodiversity and how to support their neurodivergent colleagues, your entire organization can benefit. Neurodivergent employees commonly bring a range of skills and attributes to the workplace, including creativity, lateral thinking, innovation, strategic insight, and high levels of consistency in performance. Your team may also benefit from having people on it with different perspectives and methods of thinking.

Unfortunately, neurodivergent colleagues may hide their differences for fear of being judged or discriminated against. (Some may describe this as having an "invisible disability" because it may not be visually apparent that someone is not neurotypical.) Experts say that many will only tell a manager or human resources (HR) representative if problems arise and they feel they have no other option—for example, in a disciplinary hearing.

Adapting to the needs of the neurodiverse

Most working environments are full of potential distractions or barriers that can negatively affect neurodivergent employees. For example, employees with ADHD or autism can be particularly sensitive to certain sounds, sights, and smells.

You can help make your employees more comfortable by making a few simple adjustments to the workplace.

Take account of the different sensory needs of your team. For example, you might want to limit the amount of information or bright artwork displayed on walls.

Think about how sound might affect your team. Put up dividers in appropriate areas to help block and reduce noise. Create dedicated quiet areas. Regularly remind the team as a whole to be mindful of their co-workers and keep noise to a minimum.

Allow team members to book meeting rooms for tasks that require a lot of concentration.

Provide visible instructions next to office equipment such as photocopiers.

Give people organizers, lockers, cabinets, and name labels to help them organize their space and equipment.

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Be flexible. If a neurodivergent team member feels overwhelmed or distressed because of a situation or environment at work, give them the positive support they need. Be open to adjusting their accommodations so that they can continue to contribute in a positive way to their team.

Ask your HR department to update your policies and guidance on disability to include neurodivergence. Make sure that everyone is aware of this information and that it is easy to find.

Showing support for neurodivergent team members

If you are a manager, taking a few simple steps to promote awareness and acceptance of neurodiversity at your organization can help neurodivergent colleagues feel supported and accepted.

Highlight what you're doing to make the workplace more suited to neurodivergent employees. You can do this during team meetings or via your intranet or company newsletter.

Hold awareness days, and run campaigns, trainings, and workshops on neurodiversity. Encourage your team to take some time to educate themselves about what the different forms of neurodivergence are, and be sure to do the same for yourself.

Make supporting neurodiversity a part of your company culture. Ask for volunteers to be "neurodiversity champions" and create a support network. Make sure their activities are regularly communicated to the workforce.

If appropriate, encourage neurodivergent senior managers and leaders to talk about their neurodivergence. Where possible, these should relate back to the work that is being done in your organization to support neurodiversity.

Making adaptations and supporting neurodiversity in the workplace can increase productivity, assist with recruitment, and ultimately help your organization recognize the needs of your neurodivergent customers as well.