



Adecco

# Navigating Neurodiversity

A practical guide to employing  
and empowering workers who  
think differently



Want to know more about how  
Adecco can transform Direct  
Hire for your organization?  
Let's have a no-obligation chat

Let's talk

We're all about people.  
Permanently.

## Introduction

Looking for exceptional direct hires while also trying to increase diversity & inclusion in your workforce? Adecco is here to help you uncover and nurture the wealth in untapped talent pools.

“ It is our core mission to make the future work for everyone. We believe in talent, not labels, and we know that differences are not deficits ”

Today's talent market, permanently changed by the Covid pandemic and the associated Great Resignation / Re-Evaluation, is a story of labor shortages and skills gaps, creating an ever-increasing headache for HR managers across the world.

At the same time, a growing pool of potential, such as veterans or workers with disabilities, are unemployed or underemployed, but remain effectively hidden from most businesses.

This series of papers highlights Adecco's experience of working alongside those within these overlooked talent pools, and the very real benefits they can bring to companies.

Every year we connect thousands of people who are at-risk in the labor market with purposeful jobs, providing them with meaningful careers, while also giving companies first-class employees.

At Adecco, it is our core mission to make the future work for everyone. We believe in talent, not labels, and we know that differences are not deficits.

In our Direct Hire Insights series, we share our thinking on how employers can solve their hiring woes by seeking out – and empowering – this untapped talent.

# We're all about people. Permanently.



## Navigating Neurodiversity

In this first paper, we examine the benefits that neurodivergent talent can bring. We offer our tips on hiring and onboarding people with differently-wired brains, and we suggest helpful accommodations to ensure that your neurodivergent talent thrives, long-term.

While this paper focuses on neurodevelopmental disorders such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia, we acknowledge that there are huge variations in severity within each of these diagnoses. Severe forms of the respective

conditions can cause significant impairment affecting everyday activities and occupational outcomes. We also note that mental health disorders like anxiety and depression are often overlapping conditions, and even included in some definitions of neurodiversity.

We hope you find this paper an illuminating, yet practical guide to harnessing the exciting and often overlooked potential.

**Whatever your direct hire needs, Adecco is here to help. We are, after all, all about people. Permanently.**

# Why you need neurodiverse talent

The benefits of a robust diversity and inclusion (D&I) policy are well documented. In short, you cannot afford not to have a diverse and inclusive workforce and leadership team. Not only do companies with strong D&I policies enjoy better staff retention, D&I can positively impact innovation, productivity, and profit.

But while some might believe D&I is all about race, gender or sexual orientation, a truly inclusive workforce should be wider than that, embracing all of society, including those whose specific diversity might be hidden. One example of this is neurodiversity.

The term neurodiversity is a combination of 'neurological' and 'diversity'. It is the notion that brain function differences are just another form of identity and that there's no such thing as neurologically normal (or neurotypical).

## Every innovation starts with someone thinking a little differently

While neurodivergent people may struggle with specific skills, they tend to have above-average abilities – think of them as superpowers – in other areas, including analysis, information processing, and pattern recognition.



## EYe Spy

Many employers have been actively recruiting from the neurodivergent demographic for years. Notable examples include EY's long-established autism hiring program and the UK's GCHQ (the national spy agency), which continues to actively target people with dyslexia in its recruitment efforts.

Neurodiverse teams see things that others don't see, because they are comprised of people who literally think differently. As such, they can come up with novel ideas, improve product quality, and adapt in step with a fast-moving market.

But neurodivergence isn't all superpowers. Nuanced, and sometimes invisible, neurodiversity is also one of the most challenging areas of diversity and inclusion for employers.

Many companies still do not include neurodiversity in their diversity and inclusion strategies. As a result, neurodivergent people encounter many practical barriers at work as well as more subtle challenges like lack of co-worker empathy.

# How to find neurodivergent talent

Information overload, social interactions, tacit cultural norms; neurodivergent people may encounter many obstacles trying to find work. From discouraging job descriptions to unempathetic interviewers, recruitment and selection processes can be a minefield.

How can employers redress this imbalance? By taking a customer-experience approach to candidates and new hires. Here's how:

## Write inclusive job descriptions

Job descriptions that only appeal to candidates who conform to conventional standards effectively screen out neurodiverse talent.

Take time to define the exact needs of the role. Don't assume that you know because you already have an old job description. Previous job descriptions may contain outdated requirements or terminology. Start fresh, every time.

Separate 'must-haves' from 'nice-to-haves'. Neurodivergent candidates are unlikely to tick all the boxes. Their skills are often more focused than generalized.

Only use phrases like 'excellent communication skills' or 'attention to detail' if they are truly core to the role. These sorts of terms can discourage candidates who struggle with social skills or concentration in certain settings.

Include a 'neurodiversity-positive' statement. If possible, be explicit that you are happy to discuss non-standard ways of working with candidates.

Clear and concise communication is a best practice for all candidates, but certain neurodivergent candidates will have particular difficulty interpreting the context in which words are used, especially when they are used in an unusual way. Be direct. Avoid jargon.

## Ensure fair selection

Your selection process should not be focused on weeding people out, especially in today's tight labor market. Here's how to make it neurodiverse positive.

**Cast your nets wide.** Don't go to the same candidate sources over and over. Actively seek out and engage with neurodiverse communities and bodies.

**Acknowledge internal biases.** Make sure that your processes are designed to find the right people and not just the people that you are comfortable with. Set up training or workshops on diverse hiring for everyone involved in the process.

**Don't penalize the past.** Avoid discounting candidates with breaks in their educational or work histories. Neurodivergent individuals often deal with stigma and/or lack of support, which can lead to gaps on resumes.

**Beware automated systems.** Applicant Tracking Systems (ATS) and Recruiting Management Systems (RMS) often exclude potentially high-performing neurodivergent candidates who don't fit the mold. Regularly audit any used by your company to ensure they are not amplifying prejudices.

## Set clear guidelines around disclosure

Depending on your country, directly asking a candidate about their disability status is likely against the law. On the other hand, offering candidates the opportunity to disclose any conditions that they would like to disclose can open opportunities for potentially helpful accommodations in the recruitment process and beyond.

Give reassurance about your company's neurodiversity-positive culture. Provide clear guidelines, optional forms and in-person opportunities. And make sure your organization is loud and proud about celebrating difference, rather than simply tolerating it.

## Make sure interviews are fair

Conventional interviews can disadvantage neurodivergent people, especially if they struggle with eye contact, social anxiety, or confidence issues.

Here's how to make interviews easier for neurodiverse candidates:

- Ask direct questions. (Some neurodivergent candidates won't 'get' nuance.)
- Avoid large panels or committees.
- Hold interviews in a quiet, distraction-free environment (or via video).
- Give detailed instructions on how to get to the interview venue, well in advance.
- Provide easy-to-follow guidance on what to expect. Add who will be present, and how long each stage will last.
- Allow candidates ample time to process and respond to each question.
- Be tolerant of different body language, social styles, and eye contact.

- Encourage certain candidates to bring a helper to the interview.

## Provide alternative assessment options

Consider alternative testing methods, such as allowing the candidate to submit work samples instead of sitting psychometric tests. (Paid) work trials are another effective way to test a candidate's capabilities relative to the specific role. Always make tests available in multiple formats where possible, such as verbal or recorded instructions rather than long texts. Be clear about each test's purpose.

## Set up review panels

Review panels are a great way to build objectivity into what can be subjective decisions. Consider building a panel comprised of people from different departments and backgrounds to review candidate shortlists and selection processes.

## Onboarding

Group-based onboarding programs could potentially trigger symptoms in certain neurodivergent employees. Provide tailored, one-to-one alternatives as needed.

Points to consider:

- Large volumes of onboarding materials can easily overwhelm candidates. Consider providing cadenced need-to-know information in a variety of formats.
- Spell out any unwritten conventions like work hours and break times.
- Conduct a workplace preference survey so new hires can tell you what works best for them, then adjust as necessary.

# Nurturing neurodiverse employees for long-haul success

It's your role as an employer to maximize opportunities and minimize challenges for every employee. The business benefits of neurodiversity dwarf the investment costs of most workplace adjustments, which are often easy and cheap to implement. Some of the most helpful accommodations are basic tolerance (*meeting people where they are*) and common sense (*don't give number-intense tasks to people with dyscalculia*).

Practical ways to help neurodiverse employees thrive long-term in your workplace include:

## Nurture a neurodiversity-positive employer brand

Make neurodiversity an explicit part of your employee value proposition, even if you are just getting started with neurodiversity. Include individual neurodivergent employees who have thrived at your company in brand communications. The important thing is that everyone feels 'seen' and like they belong.

## Provide assistive technology

Some people with dyspraxia-related motor coordination issues might find it difficult to use equipment like printers, keyboards, or other devices. Some people with autism might have limitations around speech. Assistive technology like speech-to-text or text-to-speech software, mind-mapping tools, and colored reading panels can break down a lot of these barriers. From enabling free virtual assistant software on your network, to licensing dyslexic-friendly reading software, there's a lot you can do to help neurodiverse employees achieve their potential.

## If possible, don't insist on in-person presence

For certain neurodivergent workers, having to work from a busy office can cause anxiety and

sensory overload. Long commutes can also present challenges, too. Many neurodivergent workers have welcomed the pandemic-induced switch to homeworking. However, shifting schedules and pandemic guidelines can cause different problems, so – again – never assume.

## Consider making physical adjustments at work

Bright lighting, erratic noise, endless interruptions. Neurodivergent employees can easily become over-stimulated, stressed, and isolated in typical work environments. If you really need to insist on in-person presence, you can make it easier by:

- Investing in adjustable lighting or desk lamps.
- Adding partitions and dividers.
- Providing standing desks, basic exercise equipment, or encouraging frequent breaks outside.
- Setting up quiet spaces.
- Doing all the above for everyone; don't single out neurodivergent employees.

## Check-in regularly

Make the time to check in on how neurodiverse employees are doing. Ask whether they are getting the help they need to perform (extra time, information in a suitable format, reasonable meeting schedules, quiet time to concentrate). You might even consider reassigning certain non-core aspects of a job role if needed.

## Minimize surprises

At work, situations arise that can't always be planned. But last-minute changes and interruptions can trigger symptoms in some people with autism and other conditions. Some will have planned their schedule meticulously and even a small unplanned event can cause a

lot of distress. Help them feel more in control by sticking to plans when possible. And when you can't, provide buffers like 10-minute warnings or different time options.

## Provide a safe, forgiving, and flexible environment

Engaging a neurodiverse workforce for the long-haul means ensuring your entire workforce is ready to integrate people who think differently. Provide training to counter any misconceptions or stigma. Set up support groups and neurotypical ally networks. You may want to consult an external expert if you are unsure what adjustments you need to make. The end game is to make sure everyone feels safe, seen, and valued.

# Understanding neurodivergent employees

No two people are the same. Neurodivergent employees have the same variety of skills and intelligence as the rest of the population. And while some people identify with terms like 'dyslexic' or 'autistic', neurotypical individuals will often have overlays with people who are neurodivergent.

## Talent. Not labels.

Workers across the neurodiversity spectrum can thrive in all kinds of careers, from jobs requiring extensive international travel, to those working on complex, multi-stakeholder projects.

It's important to avoid simplistic labelling or stereotypes. Well-meaning managers trying to 'protect' neurodivergent people from stressful situations can inadvertently prevent them from achieving their full potential.

However, understanding some of the main facets of the most common brain differences, and the impact they can have at work, can be helpful for colleagues and managers.





Autism is a lifelong developmental difference of varying severity that affects how people perceive the world and interact with others. People with autism can face challenges in social interaction and restricted or repetitive patterns of thought and behavior. However, many people with autism have exceptional skills that out-perform neurotypical people in specific areas.

**1%**

of the world's population has an autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

**80%**

unemployment rate (plus, many more are underemployed)

**90% to 140%**

better productivity among ASD employees compared to neurotypicals in some studies

## Potential strengths at work

- + Strong problem-solving and analytical/ logical thinking.
- + Data-driven thinking style.
- + Focus and concentration for long periods.
- + Ability to assimilate and retain detailed information.
- + Punctuality, reliability, dedication.

## Potential challenges

- 🔔 Social interaction issues; may struggle to 'read' people.
- 🔔 Literal thinking can cause confusion when others use jargon or abstract ideas.
- 🔔 Can appear 'aloof' due to issues with eye contact or social anxiety.
- 🔔 Difficulties with changes in structure and routine.
- 🔔 Prone to over-stimulation and sensory processing issues.

# Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)



ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition affecting brain structure and neurotransmission. Despite having the same intelligence spread as the general population, adults with ADHD face higher levels of unemployment and underemployment. However, ADHD can bring outstanding energy, drive, and focus. Given the right conditions, people with ADHD can excel in fast-changing environments that reward creativity, leading some to call the condition the 'entrepreneur's superpower'.

## 2.8%

Worldwide prevalence of ADHD

## 30%

chronic unemployment issues among populations with ADHD

## -17%

lower earnings among ADHD population than their peers (according to an academic study of the Swedish population)

### Potential strengths at work

- + Comfortable with ambiguity and risk-taking under pressure.
- + Insightfulness, creative thinking, and problem-solving.
- + Ease with multitasking.
- + Ability to hyper-focus when sufficiently stimulated.

### Potential challenges

- 🔔 Time management
- 🔔 Restless, distracted, easily bored.
- 🔔 Difficulty screening out sensory input.
- 🔔 Challenges switching focus once 'in the zone'



Dyslexia is the most common form of neurodivergence. It can cause problems with reading, writing, spelling, and memorizing. Employees with dyslexia can struggle with text-heavy documents and jargon. However, people with dyslexia are often able to see connections that others may miss. Indeed, the very tasks dyslexic people tend to struggle with are increasingly being done by machines. People with dyslexia often excel in the soft skills most sought-after in the digital age, like communication, creativity, and complex problem-solving.

Related conditions include dyspraxia (affecting motor and cognitive skills); dyscalculia: (impaired ability to process numbers); and dysgraphia (affecting fine motor skills, including the physical and mental process of writing).

## up to 20%

of the US population is dyslexic

## 55%

of employers have a poor or non-existent understanding of dyslexic strengths

### Potential strengths at work

- + Inventiveness, resourcefulness, and creativity.
- + Big picture view, pattern-spotting, powerful qualitative reasoning.
- + Entrepreneurial aptitude; risk-taking.
- + Visual narrative thinking and powerful storytelling abilities.

### Potential challenges

- 🔔 Weaker working memory and personal organization.
- 🔔 Challenges when needing to read or write quickly.
- 🔔 Difficulty accurately copying or recording information.
- 🔔 Can get overwhelmed by incoming information (written or spoken).

## 4 out of 5

dyslexic people attribute their success to 'dyslexic thinking'

## Keep an open mind

With incidence of neurological differences so high in the general population, it is more than likely that you already have neurodivergent people in your workforce. Bear in mind that employees may not disclose (or even know) that they have a condition. Also, avoid assumptions about whether someone is neurodivergent. All workers – neurodivergent and neurotypical alike – can benefit when managers and co-workers level-up their understanding.

Person-centric management and interviewing styles are key. Managers likely won't always get it right. Accept the challenging attributes as well as the positives, keep listening, and keep making the effort to get to know all your employees as valued individuals.

## Whatever your permanent placement needs, Adecco is here to help.



We see *The Great Resignation* as an opportunity to revitalize tired, homogeneous workforces with an injection of fresh-thinking talent from the margins.



We develop programs and pathways to reduce workforce barriers and strengthen employability through training.



We embrace workers across the whole diversity spectrum – and mine untapped talent pools that others ignore.



We reimagine outdated strategies across the entire recruitment process. We reject well-trodden paths.

People with diverse abilities are ready and able to work.  
Let Adecco's Direct Hire service help you hire them.