Australian Government
Department of Finance

Understanding neurodivergence and the experience of neurodivergent employees

This information paper provides a brief introduction to neurodivergence and highlights common property and related barriers faced by neurodivergent employees in the workplace.

In consultation with

autism queensland

Terminology[1]

Neurodiversity is the umbrella term that refers to the natural variations and differences in the way information is processed within human brains. Neurodiversity recognises that there is not one "right" way to think, learn, or experience the world.

Neurodivergent is a term to describe the way information is processed in human brains which differs from the societal majority. There are many ways that brains can be different or diverge, such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, menopause

Neurotypical is a term to describe the way information is processed in human brains thought to be consistent with the societal majority.

Background

An effective Australian Public Service (APS) needs a diverse workforce that is reflective of the community it serves. An inclusive physical environment assists in creating an inclusive workplace culture that enables all people to thrive in their careers and is a key contributor to the attraction and retention of staff.

Neurodivergent people bring unique strengths, qualities, and expertise to the community around them. They often experience difficulties and barriers in their everyday lives,

[1] Australian Neurodiversity Toolkit

particularly if they are not understood, or if the right supports and environments are not available to them.

For employers, this means first understanding neurodivergence and how it impacts in the workplace and then working to foster genuine inclusion through the provision of a safe and accommodating environment that encourages inclusivity and empowerment for every employee at every step of their employment.

Genuine inclusion is achieved through the adoption of a universal design[2] approach that embraces and accommodates the diversity of human experiences. Universal design recognises differences, offers flexibility, and creates environments where everyone is welcome and feels comfortable being themselves.

Common environmental barriers and challenges faced by neurodivergent employees in the workplace

Sensory experiences

Neurodivergent people often experience or respond to sensory input such as sounds, lights, tastes, smells and textures in different and unique ways. While some sensory experiences may be meaningful and enjoyable, others can create significant discomfort or barriers to workplace participation. Common barriers created by the sensory environment in the workplace include:

- Auditory barriers
  - loud or unpredictable noises such as hand dryers, announcements, beeping, bells, alarms
  - multiple or competing sounds such as background noise, noisy equipment, several people speaking simultaneously
  - poor acoustics causing echo, sound distortion, or acoustic reverberation (sound bouncing).
- Visual barriers
  - overwhelming patterns or bold colours
  - visual clutter or visual distractions such as disorganised spaces, open office plans, windows with busy views
  - bright or changing lights such as fluorescent lights, digital signage that automatically changes, or flickering lights
  - glare
  - reflective surfaces, both inside and outside the premises, such as windows or mirrors that cause visual discomfort or distraction.

[2] https://www.finance.gov.au/government/property-and-construction/creating-accessible-and-inclusive-spaces/property accessibility-assessment-tool/universal-design-workplace

- Additional barriers
  - temperature discomfort
  - strong scents such as cleaning products, air fresheners, perfumes, aromatic plants
  - lack of access to retreat spaces including poorly identified retreat spaces
  - limited flexibility or control over the above sensory elements, such as inability to adjust the room temperature or light control.

Lack of predictability

Predictability in the workplace is key to creating inclusive environments for neurodivergent employees. When employees understand their physical environment, workplace procedures, and available supports, they experience less stress and anxiety and are empowered to make informed decisions, in line with their needs and preferences. Common predictability barriers that create challenges include:

- lack of information readily available about what to expect from the physical environment such as venue maps, office layout, sensory and mobility mapping, images or videos of the space
- inconsistencies between online information and actual workplace conditions due to outdated content or uncommunicated changes
- lack of explicit information about formal or informal processes and procedures. Consider protocols for shared spaces or equipment, procedures for requesting accommodations and flexible working options
- inadequate or inconsistent wayfinding systems, including insufficient signage, confusing directional information, or environments lacking intuitive design features.

Unclear or confusing systems and processes

Neurodivergent employees often thrive with structured, predictable workplace routines and clearly communicate expectations. Confusing or ambiguous systems create unnecessary cognitive load, causing stress and detracting from core job responsibilities. Common system-related barriers include:

- inadequate instructions for shared spaces and equipment such as vague or missing visual instructions for kitchen appliances or insufficient labeling of storage areas
- confusing or undefined protocols for reserving and using communal areas like meeting rooms or quiet spaces
- lack of explicit and/or unclear emergency evacuation procedures
- inconsistent or unclear workplace arrival and departure processes.

Limited information about available workplace accommodations, facilities or supports and how they can be accessed such as quiet spaces, flexible arrangements, parent rooms.