



EMBRACING NEURODIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

A guide for creating a neuro-inclusive
selection process

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Embracing neurodiversity in the workplace

In today's ever-changing social landscape and hypercompetitive market, embracing neurodiversity in the workplace isn't just an ethical decision, it's a strategic one.

The term 'neurodiversity' describes the natural variation in how people think, learn, relate to others, and experience the world.¹ It was modeled after the word 'biodiversity' to convey that there are limitless variations in human cognition and that dissimilarity is essential for both stability and growth.² When we talk about neurodiversity in the workplace, we are typically discussing it in the context of neurodivergent people, or those with cognitive conditions like autism, ADHD, Tourette's syndrome, or dyslexia.³

Neurodivergent people have distinct skills and perspectives that drive organizational success.⁴ Their presence promotes a positive work atmosphere, enhances productivity, fuels creativity, and pushes all employees to be more empathetic and aware.^{5,6,7} It's baffling, then, to learn that the unemployment rate for neurodivergent adults in the US is an alarming 30-40% – nearly eight times the national average.⁸ This is an issue that is not unique to the United States. Neurodivergent people are consistently unemployed and underemployed around the world, making it an international problem.^{9,10,11}

We all miss out on progress and opportunity when neurodiversity is absent from our workplaces. Therefore, the goal is to build a more neurodiverse and inclusive work environment so that we do not fail to meet our potential. This starts with taking a critical look at our hiring practices.

Here are some effective approaches for enhancing neurodiversity throughout the selection process.

1

FOCUS ON BALANCED, JOB-RELATED CONTENT

A quick search for ‘top’ or ‘core’ competencies in the workplace would have you believe that every role requires an employee who is a strong communicator and skilled collaborator, which isn’t true. Competencies like communication and teamwork are some of the most sought-after skills across all regions, roles, and industries.^{12,13} These types of competencies are frequently evaluated in hiring assessments because they are important and generally applicable across job positions. However, they are also problematic for some neurodivergent candidates because they rely on social fluency – a common stumbling block among neurodivergent people.¹⁴

When building an assessment, think critically about the content and whether it captures a quality that is truly required or simply a bonus. If appropriate, aim to balance measures of social aptitude with ones that evaluate skills like problem-solving, attention to detail, and creativity, as these tend to be strengths for some neurodivergent people.^{15,16,17,18} Remember, selection assessments should measure the knowledge, skills, abilities, and characteristics necessary for a particular role. Using tests that measure competencies that are not relevant or in the ‘nice-to-have’ category can convolute results and lead to poor hiring decisions.

2

USE MULTIPLE ASSESSMENT METHODS

Certain assessment methods when used as standalone tools – like personality tests and interviews – can disproportionately screen out neurodivergent candidates.^{19,20}

Given their ability to predict performance, they are a critical component of the selection process. When using these methods, combine them with other types to better accommodate different strengths and capture a more comprehensive view of candidates’ abilities. For example, evidence shows that neurodivergent and neurotypical people perform equally well on thoughtfully designed situational judgment tests, simulated tasks, and cognitive tests.^{21,22,23}



3

GIVE CLEAR AND CONCISE INSTRUCTIONS

All candidates benefit from information clarity, but it is especially important for the neurodivergent community.²⁴

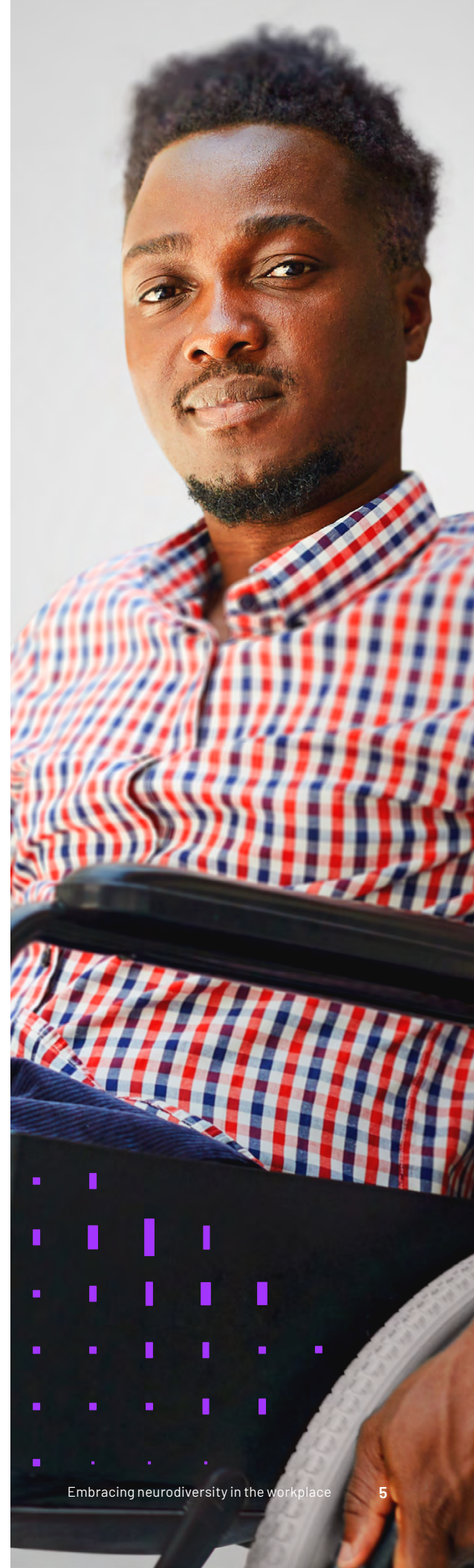
When communicating instructions, avoid jargon, ambiguity, and vagueness.²⁵ Replace abstract concepts with direct and concrete language and present information in a logical order.²⁶ Be careful not to overwhelm candidates with overly detailed descriptions, and when possible, provide diagrams or other visual aids to help clarify complex information.

4

OFFER FLEXIBILITY IN ASSESSMENT FORMATS AND RESPONSES

We all have preferred ways of processing and relaying information. Some of us like to read and write, others would rather listen and speak. For neurodivergent candidates wanting to perform their best, testing in one format over another may be a need, rather than a preference. A candidate with dyslexia, for example, may struggle with a written test but do well with an audio version.²⁷

Support neurodivergent candidates by offering flexibility in test delivery and response. Supplement written material with audio or visuals, enable screen readers, grammar and spell-check features, and allow for extra time when appropriate.²⁸



5

FOLLOW INCLUSIVE DESIGN PRINCIPLES

Neuro-inclusive design is a ‘human-centered approach’ that recognizes that our cognitive differences impact how we grasp information. The goal of this approach is to create a user experience that accommodates these differences and provides everyone with an ‘equal opportunity to engage with content.’²⁹

When creating assessments, use readable fonts, appropriate color contrasts, and acoustics that minimize background noise.³⁰ Design clutter-free interfaces with predictable navigation and allow for customization to reduce visual and cognitive strain (e.g. light/dark mode).³¹

6

TRAIN EMPLOYEES AND KEY DECISION MAKERS

Education about neurodiversity is arguably the most important aspect of building a neuro-inclusive selection process. It not only helps reduce bias against neurodivergent candidates, but also serves as an investment in a strong diverse, equitable, and inclusive culture.^{32,33}

Prior to interacting with candidates, train recruiters, hiring managers, and other staff about common challenges faced by neurodivergent people. Teach employees how to identify and avoid biases in evaluation and challenge their own assumptions about neurodiversity. Encourage employees to adopt a non-judgmental attitude and focus on skills and potential rather than unconventional behaviors.

7

COMMUNICATE CLEARLY, EARLY, AND OFTEN

In 2023, Chang³⁴ and colleagues asked neurodivergent job seekers what makes for a positive selection experience. One of the key themes that emerged was having a clear understanding of the process in advance. Neurodivergent candidates said that they felt overwhelmed and struggled more when they did not know what to expect or what was expected from them.

To better assist neurodivergent candidates, provide detailed information about the assessment process ahead of time, including steps, time commitment, location, and dates.³⁵ If possible, let candidates know exactly what they will need to do and who they will meet. Send candidates regular reminders throughout the process and update them if something changes.



8

CREATE A COMFORTABLE ENVIRONMENT

Modern workspaces are typically designed for neurotypical people. Instead of office doors and 'cube farms,' companies have opted for open-floor plans and shared spaces, hoping to nurture creativity and collaboration.^{36,37} While unassigned seating, bright lights, noise, human traffic, and smells may be a mild nuisance for some, it can feel overstimulating and overwhelming for neurodivergent people.³⁸

For tests completed in person such as on-site interviews, be sure to create a sensory-friendly environment to minimize sensory overload. Set up distraction-free zones for testing and provide space for people to recharge. Be mindful of factors such as lighting, sound, smell, temperature, and visual stimuli that may disturb some candidates or interfere with their concentration.³⁹ When possible, allow candidates to test remotely so they can better control their environment.

9

PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES TO REQUEST ACCOMMODATIONS

Applying for a job can be difficult for anyone, but there is an added layer of complexity for candidates who require accommodations. Many neurodivergent candidates hesitate to ask for accommodations because they worry about being a burden, fear stigma, or simply do not know how to ask for assistance.⁴⁰

Support neurodivergent candidates by giving them advanced notice about what they will do during the hiring process. Then, clearly explain how to request reasonable accommodations and share what is currently available. Keep in mind that not all candidates will be comfortable disclosing their needs, so be cognizant of informal requests. For example, a candidate may ask to use speech-to-text transcription during a video interview or request a break during a test. Be flexible and prepare to adapt should the need arise.

10

MAINTAIN CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY

Candidates should feel safe to disclose their neurotype whether they need accommodations or not. Disclosure is a very complicated and personal choice. While most neurodivergent people choose not to disclose, others openly share their status.^{41,42} Candidates who choose to disclose are putting a great deal of trust in the potential employer, as it is well known that disclosure can lead to patronizing attitudes, prejudice, and rejection.^{43,44}

As the employer, recognize that the selection process is a boundary, and it is imperative not to share a candidate's information beyond the context of the process without their consent. Even if they seemed forthright about their status, respect the candidate's privacy and only communicate their information with the people who need to know.

11

FOLLOW UP WITH CANDIDATES

Following up with candidates in a timely manner is one of the easiest ways to promote a positive experience. Whether it is a simple 'we are reviewing your application' or a full feedback report, all communication matters. Yet, according to Talent Board's⁴⁵ 2023 candidate experience survey, 53% of job seekers do not receive any feedback after their initial screening and interview. Even worse, Indeed⁴⁶ reported that 40% of job seekers were 'ghosted' by their prospective organization instead of receiving a rejection notice.

For all candidates – both neurodivergent and neurotypical – follow-up and feedback can bolster confidence, improve their skills, and help them better navigate the selection process.^{47,48} It also influences their perception of the organization, commitment to the selection process, and likelihood of accepting a position if offered.⁴⁹

Touch base with candidates regularly and provide feedback that is specific, actionable, and direct throughout the selection process. Ensure candidates know where they stand, especially when they are eliminated. Remember, some neurodivergent people are especially sensitive to rejection,^{50,51} so give ample time for candidates to process the feedback and seek clarification.

12

SOLICIT AND ACT ON FEEDBACK

Candidate feedback, or reactions to the selection process, are crucial for creating an inclusive and effective system. Requesting feedback not only provides invaluable information about the tools and practices, but also signals to candidates that the organization appreciates and respects their opinion.⁵²

Solicit feedback from neurodivergent candidates and current employees to better understand what works or doesn't work in the current process. Ask about the accessibility of the materials and identify barriers to address. Make sure to periodically explore accommodations and brainstorm alternatives to traditional testing.

13

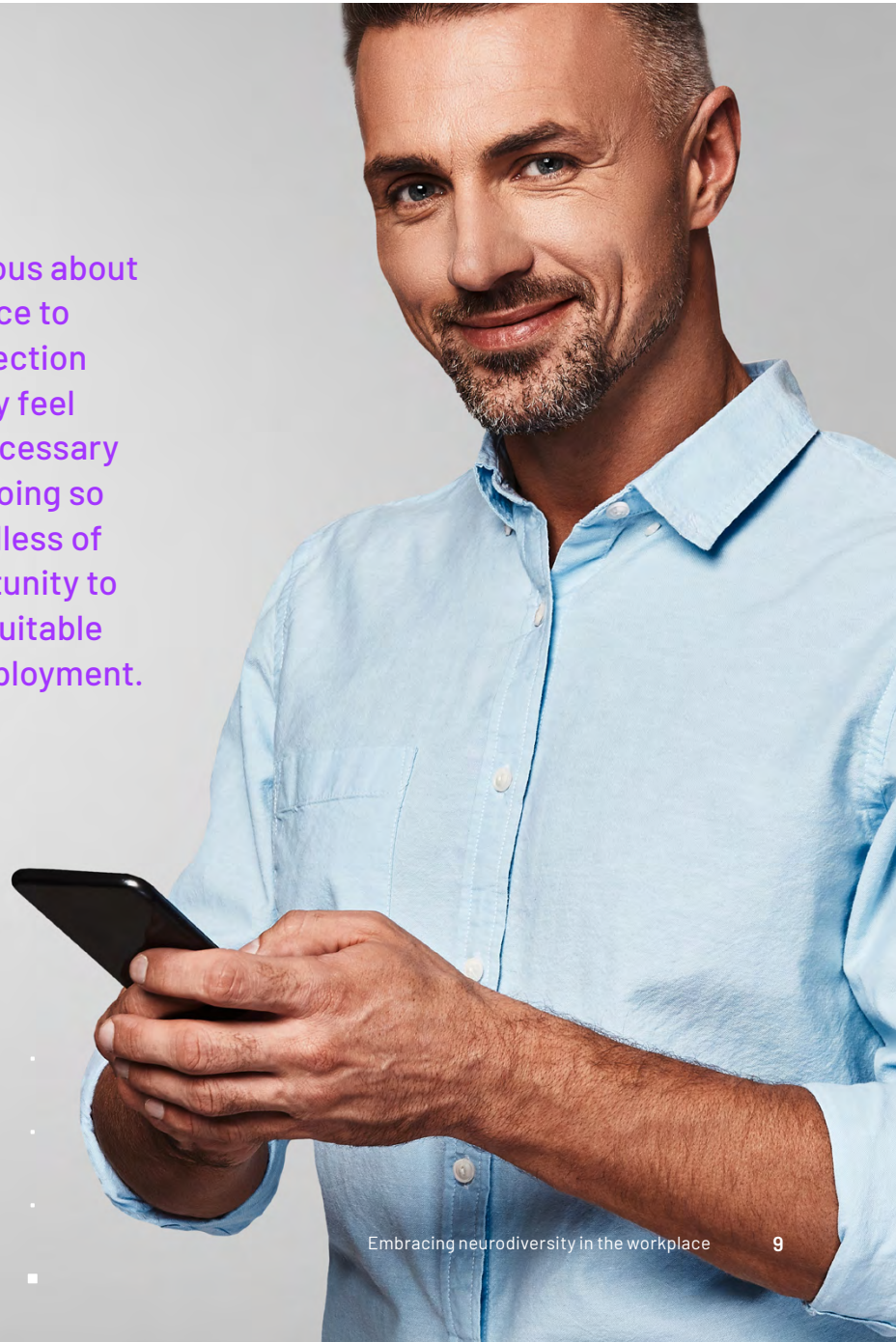
REVIEW AND ADAPT PRACTICES

A growing number of organizations have made their selection process more neuro-inclusive by adopting new ways of thinking and interacting with candidates. For example, [Microsoft](#) invites candidates to a hiring event where they spend a few days learning about the company, developing skills, and preparing for the interview. At [SAP](#), candidates are encouraged to request an alternative assessment format – like a technical skill demonstration or portfolio showcase – to demonstrate their qualifications.

Regularly review assessment procedures and outcomes to ensure they are fair and appropriate for neurodivergent candidates. Stay updated on neurodiversity research and adjust when necessary. Take inspiration from other organizations leading the neurodiversity movement and look for ways to incorporate best practices into your existing procedures.

In summary

If your organization wants to get serious about embracing neurodiversity, a good place to start is building a neuro-inclusive selection process. Although change can initially feel confusing and uncomfortable, it is necessary to achieve progress and inclusivity. Doing so will ensure that all candidates, regardless of their neurotype, have an equal opportunity to demonstrate their talents, receive equitable opportunities, and secure gainful employment.



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