



Understanding Neurodivergence in the Workplace: A Guide for Colleagues

Neurodivergent colleagues bring insight, creativity, focus and innovation. They also navigate the workplace differently and the way we communicate, organise, and collaborate can make a significant difference to their experience and success. This guide gives clear, practical ways you can improve the experience of autistic, ADHD, dyslexic, dyspraxic and otherwise neurodivergent coworkers.

Social Interaction

Social interaction doesn't work the same way for everyone. Some neurodivergent people find unstructured social situations tiring or confusing; others simply prefer clarity and purpose.

What helps:

- Keep conversations purposeful when needed. Small talk can be draining or distracting.
- Don't jump to conclusions, if someone seems blunt, quiet, or direct, it's rarely intentional rudeness.
- Respect personal preferences. Not everyone wants after-work drinks, team socials, or office chatter.
- Make expectations explicit: dress codes, meeting etiquette, what happens at a new event, who's attending, and what the goal is.



Social Communication

People communicate differently. Some neurodivergent colleagues use tone, facial expression and body language differently, some may process words literally. This may lead to misinterpretation by both parties. Many neurodivergent people prefer clear, direct communication.

What helps:

- Say exactly what you mean, avoid vague phrases, metaphors, or “in a minute” promises.
- Be specific about timeframes, tasks and boundaries.
- Use words to express feelings; don’t rely solely on tone or non-verbal cues.
- Don’t pressure eye contact, comfort improves communication.
- Break complex instructions into smaller steps and follow up with written notes, lists, or messages where useful.

Predictability and Routine

Routine supports focus and reduces anxiety. Unexpected changes, big or small, can significantly disrupt focus for some neurodivergent people, making the task more challenging.

What helps:

- Respect established routines, even if they don’t match your own way of working.
- Avoid moving desks, equipment, or shared items without letting people know.
- Give advance notice of changes (systems, staff, processes, deadlines) whenever possible.
- Use planners, calendars, agendas, or visual schedules to support clarity.
- Conduct meetings in structured way, stick to the agenda and schedule regular breaks.
- Understand that during online meetings cameras may need to be off and the chat function may be a preferable way of communicating.



Sensory Considerations

Neurodivergent people process the sensory environment differently and will have differing sensory experiences – over or under responsiveness to sensory input such as noise, light, smells, or temperature. These aren't preferences; they are genuine, sometimes overwhelming, physical experiences.

What helps:

- Check before opening windows, adjusting heating, using strong scents, or introducing new equipment.
- Be mindful that background noise (open offices, loud conversations, printers, kettles) can reduce focus.
- Fluorescent or flickering lights can be extremely uncomfortable, flag issues early.
- Keep shared spaces as clutter-free as possible.
- Recognise that alarms, sudden noises, or unexpected physical contact can be distressing.

Working Styles & Task Management

Neurodivergent colleagues often excel when expectations are clear and their strengths are recognised.

What helps:

- Clarify priorities, don't overload with mixed messages or shifting deadlines.
- Offer written summaries, follow-ups, or bullet-point actions after meetings.
- Agree communication preferences (email, chat message, written list, short call).
- Allow focus time free from interruptions.
- Encourage breaks, especially after high-demand tasks or sensory discomfort.
- When scheduling meetings, especially online, ensure there is adequate time between meetings as transitions and switching tasks can be difficult for neurodivergent people.



Strengths to Celebrate

Neurodivergent colleagues often bring:

- Strong attention to detail
- High creativity and problem-solving
- Deep specialist knowledge
- Honesty, loyalty, and reliability
- Fresh perspectives that help teams innovate
- They are can also spot dysfunction and work out what isn't working well before neurotypical people.

With understanding and flexibility, you unlock these strengths, not just for the individual, but for the whole workplace.

Final Thought

Creating an environment of mutual understanding and teamwork is simple: clear communication, respect, and flexibility. When we work together, the whole organisation benefits. When we communicate clearly and respect differences, we create an environment and culture where everyone thrives.



Top Tips for Supporting Neurodivergent Colleagues

1. Keep Social Interaction Clear and Respectful

- Keep conversations purposeful when needed; small talk can drain focus.
- Don't assume intent, directness or quietness isn't rudeness.
- Respect personal choices around socials, noise or downtime.
- Make expectations explicit: what's happening, who's involved and why.

2. Communicate Clearly and Directly

- Say what you mean - avoid vagueness, metaphors, or unclear timeframes.
- Be specific about tasks, deadlines, and boundaries.
- Use clear verbal communication rather than relying on tone or body language.
- Don't pressure eye contact. Comfort supports better communication.
- Follow up complex instructions with written notes or checklists.

3. Support Predictability and Routine

- Respect routines that colleagues rely on to stay focused.
- Avoid unexpected changes to desks, equipment, or processes.
- Give advance warning of any change—big or small.
- Use agendas, schedules, and planners to keep things clear.
- Run meetings with structure, stick to the agenda, and include breaks.
- Allow camera-off participation and use of chat in online meetings.

4. Be Mindful of Sensory Needs

- Check before changing lighting, heating, scents, or equipment.
- Keep noise levels down where possible; background noise affects concentration.
- Report flickering lights or sensory irritants quickly.
- Avoid clutter in shared spaces.
- Understand that alarms, sudden noises, or unexpected touch can be distressing.

5. Adapt Working Styles & Task Management

- Clarify priorities—don't overload people with shifting messages.
- Offer written summaries and bullet-point actions after meetings.
- Agree communication preferences (email, chat, written list, short call).
- Protect uninterrupted focus time.
- Encourage breaks after demanding tasks or sensory overwhelm.
- Space out online meetings—task switching takes energy.



6. Recognise and Value Neurodivergent Strengths

Neurodivergent colleagues often bring:

- Strong attention to detail
- High creativity and innovative thinking
- Deep specialist knowledge
- Honesty, loyalty, and reliability
- Ability to spot problems early and offer fresh perspectives

Create the conditions and these strengths lift the entire team.

7. Final Tip: Clarity + Respect = Better Outcomes

Support isn't complicated. Clear communication, flexibility, and respect go a long way. When people feel understood, they do their best work—and the whole organisation benefits.