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# THINKING DIFFERENT

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## NEURODIVERSITY & YOU

**A guide to  
thinking different  
for everybody**

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Conceived and developed in collaboration by:



## Neurodiversity at work

Are there people in your team who think, learn or interact with people differently to what's considered 'normal'? It's more than likely, since around one in five of the working population in creative workplaces will be neurodivergent in some way.

This figure will continue to rise due to increased awareness leading to increased diagnoses. Additionally, they will grow as more and more businesses see and appreciate the incredible advantages of a more neurodiverse workforce. Not only can it enhance creativity and innovation and foster inclusivity and empathy, but it can also deliver more effective and impactful communication strategies.

In order to make the most of these advantages, it's essential for everyone in a business to understand more about neurodiversity and to do what they can to create a welcoming and completely inclusive workplace. This guide was designed to help do just that, providing insights, information and guidance on how best to make it happen.

So read on to discover what you need to know and what you can do.

### Neurodiversity – a definition

Neurodiversity refers to the range of thinking, learning, interacting with people that exists in the whole population. If someone is neurodivergent, they think, learn, interact with people differently from what is considered 'typical'.<sup>1</sup>

The fact that neurodivergent individuals think different is a strength and can be seen in conditions\* related to:

- Dyslexia
- Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)
- Autism Spectrum Conditions (ASC or ASD)
- Dyscalculia
- Dyspraxia (also known as Developmental Coordination Disorder/DCD)
- Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)

\*Protected characteristics under the Equality Act (2010). Other neurodivergent characteristics exist.

## Neurodiversity in healthcare communications

As an industry, we're facing unprecedented challenges around resourcing, time and budget constraints. There is a real need for us all to 'think differently' in terms of strategy, creativity and delivery if we want to meet these challenges and continue to innovate on both client and agency sides.

And this plays directly to the strengths of neurodivergent individuals, whose talents can include lateral thinking, hyperfocus, problem-solving abilities, meticulous attention to detail, highly analytical thinking, creativity, intense expertise and innovation; found more frequently in the neurodivergent population. Recruiting and supporting each person to maximise their skills, therefore, is more than good for the long-term success of your team and your organisation as a whole – it's vital.

Many neurodivergent individuals become successful leaders in their fields. Studies have revealed:

- 40% of self-made millionaires in Britain had a diagnosis of dyslexia<sup>3</sup>
- There is a proven link between ADHD and an entrepreneurial mindset in business<sup>4</sup>

## Neurodiversity and mental wellbeing

Neurodivergent people live in a world that is not structurally made for them, so they may face challenges that a neurotypical person won't. This can have a negative effect on their mental wellbeing due to:

- Insufficient support, and the stress of 'masking' - acting neurotypically in order to avoid negativity
- A lack of acceptance and understanding at work, meaning neurodivergent people can feel unfulfilled and develop negative thoughts that can lead to mental wellbeing difficulties including anxiety and depression, if left unresolved
- Problems with maintaining relationships, avoiding social situations (either in their personal or work life) or, in extreme cases, self-harm or suicidal thoughts
- Differences in interacting and communicating with people, leading to colleagues excluding, marginalising and isolating them due to a lack of understanding
- Anxiety at the idea of simply being at work, which could ultimately affect their performance

Our shared aim therefore must be to make sure that policies and processes are set up so that:

- those with specific needs are appropriately cared for
- that businesses benefit from those who think differently

## Seeing strengths within each neurotype

To be a successful team in healthcare communications, you'll need to bring together individuals with different forms of intelligence – a collective that can think strategically, creatively and analytically.

Here you can see the natural variations in how neurodivergent individuals think, act, learn, communicate, are motivated and relate to each other, depending on the particular characteristic. It'll help you see where they could fit into your team:

It's important to acknowledge that these strengths and talents are not found in every neurodivergent person but are found more often in the neurodivergent population.

## Thinking about those who think different

Despite the huge value neurodiverse people can bring to an organisation, they can sometimes have concerns about stigmatisation and a possible lack of understanding from employers and colleagues. And this can prevent them from either obtaining or disclosing a proper diagnosis. Instead they may make efforts to mask or camouflage their differences, which can require a huge amount of energy and can be detrimental to their mental and physical health. But you can play your part in making sure this doesn't happen.

**Identifying strengths within each neurotype.**

**You may recognise positive characteristics in your team members who already bring their different thinking to the table.**

### **DYSLEXIA**

- Outside-the-box thinkers
- See the bigger picture
- Highly creative
- Excellent problem-solvers
- Strong visual-spatial skills
- High emotional intelligence

### **ADHD**

- Hyperfocused
- Resilient
- Creative
- Spontaneous and courageous
- High-energy
- Good conversational skills
- Warm and caring

### **AUTISM**

- Attention to detail
- Unique visual perception
- Creative and artistic talents
- Exceptional mathematical and technical abilities
- Interests or expertise in 'niche' areas
- Honesty and loyalty

### **DYSCALCULIA**

- Creative and artistic
- Strongly strategic
- Intuitive
- Excellent organisational skills
- A love of words

### **DYSPRAXIA**

- Creative
- Problem-solving
- Multi-tasking
- Verbal skills
- Empathetic

## Neurodiversity-friendly: what you can do

Working with neurodiverse people can bring incredible benefits to your team, but bear in mind that the standard workplace environment and processes, while working fine for a neurotypical brain, may bring challenges for them. It is simply not structured to suit their needs.

So, first things first, try to understand the individual challenges faced by your neurodiverse colleagues. This is more than just a caring and inclusive thing to do; it'll help strengthen your team's working relationship and support the success of the work you deliver too.

Secondly, make sure you recognise that no two individuals are the same. Although some blanket adjustments may be highly beneficial, listening and responding to individual needs is crucial. Creating an open and inclusive environment, through training and discussion forums, is therefore an essential component.

Lastly, and if done with care, it's also worth encouraging neurodivergent individuals to share their experiences, so others can better understand how best to engage with them. This campaign and associated materials will hopefully give you an excellent catalyst to start such discussions.

The key here is to make them feel an equal team member who brings different skills, rather than a 'different' person.

### Examples of how organisations may make reasonable adjustments for neurodivergent individuals.

- Quiet workspaces or noise-cancelling headphones to minimise distractions and to support the concentration and attention of individuals who experience hyperactivity.
- Dedicated workspaces, as opposed to hot-desking, for people who suffer anxiety around change.

## Communicating effectively with neurodivergent colleagues

Neurodiverse individuals may also need information presented to them in formats other than text only, such as infographics or illustrations - and they may also digest information at different speeds.

As well as this, some employees may benefit from special software, such as government-funded spelling and grammar checking, electronic planners, reminders and task lists.

Find out more about Access to Work here: [www.gov.uk/access-to-work](http://www.gov.uk/access-to-work)

Recorded meetings on a mobile or laptop, to refer to later, can be preferable to written notes for some.

## Starting a conversation around neurodiversity

As with any topic, it's important to prepare yourself to have a conversation around neurodiversity. So we recommend that you:

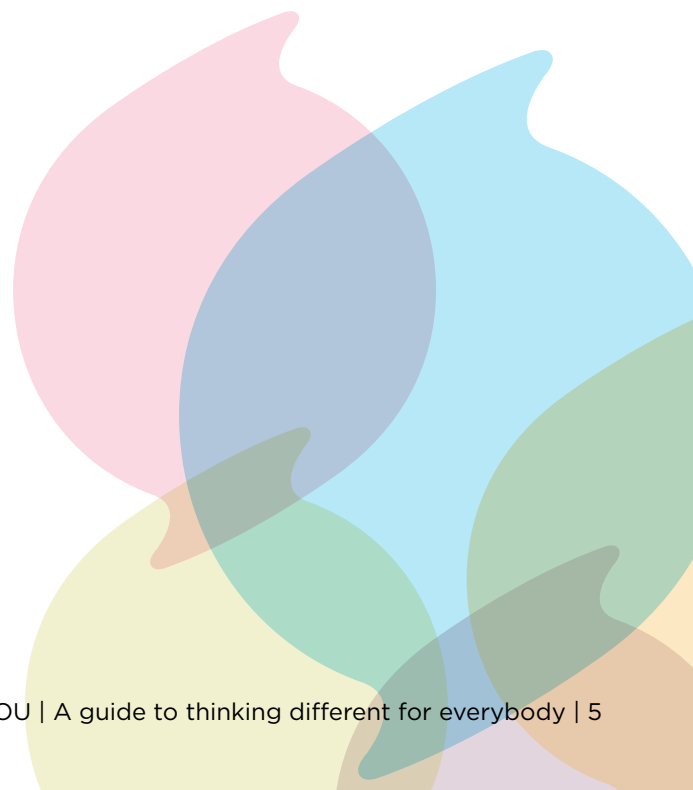
1. Familiarise yourself with the concept of neurodiversity, including the recognition of diverse cognitive styles and talents – which lays the foundation for a respectful and informed conversation.
2. Appreciate that each person's experience with neurodiversity is unique, so you should therefore approach the conversation with an open mind and a willingness to listen without making assumptions or judgments.
3. Show empathy and sensitivity towards the individual's experiences and challenges, as discussing neurodiversity may be sensitive and potentially emotional for them.
4. Emphasise your commitment to creating an inclusive and supportive environment for all employees, including those who are neurodivergent, and highlight the value of diverse perspectives and talents in the workplace.
5. Respect the individual's privacy and confidentiality regarding their neurodiversity status and ensure that any discussions about it are conducted in a private and confidential setting, thus maintaining their dignity and autonomy.
6. Let the individual lead the conversation and ask them what language and terms they feel comfortable with and ask them what has helped them do their best work in the past and what/who can help now.

## Start thinking different today

As we pointed out earlier, there is a real and pressing need in healthcare communications to create cultures that enable and empower fertile environments for invention and innovation. To achieve this, we need to make sure our industry is a welcoming place for people who perceive situations, process information and find focus in different ways.

And we all have a role to play. So don't wait for your organisation to do something – catalyse it by talking to your manager about discussing neurodivergence at your next team or company meeting. Show understanding to colleagues that think and work differently and consider how you might work differently with them – always of course being sensitive about their own privacy and desire for their neurodiversity to be recognised.

Neurodiversity in the workplace is something to be supported and encouraged because of the massive difference it can make. And it starts with you.



## Additional sources of information

Organisations directly related to the **THINKING DIFFERENT** programme:

- **ADHD Foundation, The Neurodiversity Charity**, the UK's leading neurodiversity charity [[adhdfoundation.org.uk](http://adhdfoundation.org.uk)]
- **The Advisory ND** - providing a range of consultancy services for organisations in how to attract, recruit, support and promote neurodiversity in the workplace to unlock its business power [[theadvisorynd.com](http://theadvisorynd.com)]

## Other relevant organisations

- **Institute of Neurodiversity** - a global organisation aiming to give a voice to those with neurodiversity [[ioneurodiversity.org](http://ioneurodiversity.org)]
- **EUCAP** (European Council of Autistic People) - an umbrella organisation for autistic-led organisations in Europe [[eucap.eu](http://eucap.eu)]
- **European Dyslexia Association** - European umbrella organisation for associations across Europe [[eda-info.eu](http://eda-info.eu)]
- **Dyspraxia Foundation** - UK charity [[dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk](http://dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk)]
- **The Brain Charity** - UK charity supporting all neurological conditions [[thebraincharity.org.uk](http://thebraincharity.org.uk)]
- **National Autistic Society** - UK charity [[autism.org.uk](http://autism.org.uk)]
- **British Dyslexia Association** - UK charity [[bdadyslexia.org.uk](http://bdadyslexia.org.uk)]

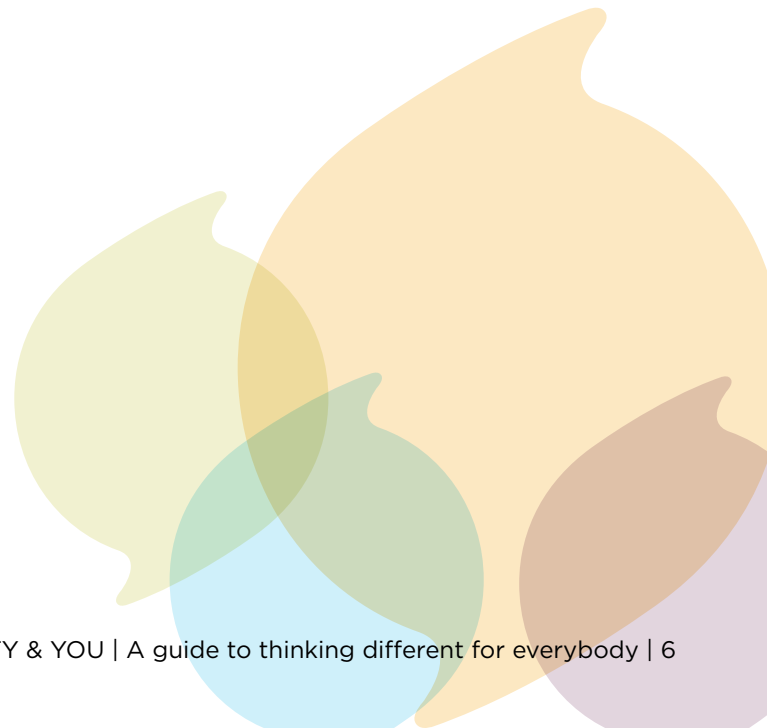
## Contributors

**THINKING DIFFERENT** has been co-created between the Healthcare Communications Association and Fox&Cat to help guide important conversations around neurodiversity at work.

Because some neurodivergent individuals are more prone to stress than the neurotypical people, Fox&Cat has invested in this initiative as a part of its ongoing commitment to lessen the impact of stress that affects 78% of people working in the comms industry.

The creation of this campaign also draws on the welcome expert advice and input of:


- Paul Hutchings, Founder, Fox&Cat
- Mike Dixon, CEO, Healthcare Communications Association (HCA)
- Professor Amanda Kirby, ADHD Foundation
- Antonia Katsambis, Independent HR Practitioner
- Diane Wass, Managing Director, JPA Health & Trustee of the ADHD Foundation
- Dr Emma Mahoney, Founder, The Advisory ND




## About the project

**THINKING DIFFERENT** explores the many advantages of welcoming and involving neurodivergent individuals in our dynamic healthcare communications industry. In doing so, not only can we enhance creativity and innovation while also fostering inclusivity and empathy, but we can also deliver more effective and impactful communication strategies.

This guide forms part of a wider series aimed to inform and support everyone working in communications. Connected to this series are two other documents:

 **THINKING DIFFERENT**  
A guide for employers and managers on welcoming and celebrating neurodiversity in the workplace.

 **NEURODIVERSITY & ME**  
A guide for those who think differently and would like more information because they'd like to start a conversation about neurodiversity.

This campaign has also been reviewed and fully endorsed by the ADHD Foundation - The Neurodiversity Charity.

**Disclaimer:** we have aligned language to the current definitions around neurodiversity, but acknowledge that our choices may not reflect everyone's views.

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### References

- 1 Very Well Mind, 2024. Accessed via: [www.verywellmind.com/what-is-neurodivergence-and-what-does-it-mean-to-be-neurodivergent-5196627](https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-neurodivergence-and-what-does-it-mean-to-be-neurodivergent-5196627) (Last accessed: March 2024)
- 2 Information Week, 2023. Neurodiversity hiring will be a competitive advantage. Accessed via: [www.informationweek.com/it-leadership/neurodiversity-hiring-will-be-a-competitive-advantage](https://www.informationweek.com/it-leadership/neurodiversity-hiring-will-be-a-competitive-advantage)
- 3 Alexander-Passe, N. (2015). Perceptions of success in Dyslexic adults in the UK.
- 4 Moore, C. B., McIntyre, N. H., Lanivich S E (2021) ADHD-Related Neurodiversity and the Entrepreneurial Mindset