



THINKING DIFFERENT

**A guide for
employers and managers
on welcoming and
celebrating neurodiversity**



Conceived and developed in collaboration by:



fox & cat®



About this guide

Over the following pages, we'll explore the many advantages of welcoming and involving all of us 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.¹

This guide forms part of a wider series aimed to inform and support everyone working in communications. So please also look out for:

NEURODIVERSITY & ME

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

NEURODIVERSITY & YOU

Information for your whole team to encourage them to find out more about working with, and having a conversation around neurodiversity at work

We hope what you read here encourages you to get involved in the campaign and play your part in ensuring that the healthcare communications industry as a whole is welcoming and celebrating neurodiversity.

To this end, all the resources mentioned are also being made available directly to anyone working in the industry via the HCA and Fox&Cat websites. You may therefore be approached by others within your organisation about these resources, in which case we recommend you read the full campaign pack so you're fully aware of what it covers.

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

What is neurodiversity?

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' within our society.²

Different minds demonstrate very different skills and forms of intelligence - and these are increasingly valued in a variety of roles and functions in all kinds of organisations.

Neurodiversity in healthcare communications

In the UK, an estimated 14% of the population are neurodivergent; in creative workspaces, including healthcare communications, that figure is around 20%.^{3,4}

And this is a welcome statistic since, 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' if we want to meet these challenges and continue to innovate on both client and agency sides.¹

So right now, embracing diversity isn't just a moral imperative; it can also give teams a genuine strategic advantage.

When businesses bring in the right neurodivergent minds, they can expect:

- Unique perspectives
- Lateral thinking
- Hyperfocus
- Problem-solving skills
- Meticulous attention to detail
- Highly analytical thinking
- Creativity
- Intense expertise
- Innovative ideas

Get it wrong, though, and it can lead to unhappy teams, frustrated individuals and - left unchecked - inevitable issues for businesses.

After all, successful communications is about the right blend of strategy, creative and client service. And that requires all types of brains - from lateral, imaginative minds for invention and innovation to the meticulous, analytical minds needed for delivery. Businesses that orchestrate the better coming together of these different brains will unlock greater performance and value.

Neurodiversity and mental wellbeing

Neurodivergent individuals 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 within communications businesses are set up so that firstly, those with specific needs are appropriately cared for at work and secondly, that businesses benefit from those who think differently.

Why hire neurodivergent people?

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.

When it comes to hiring, there is a very human tendency to surround ourselves with like-minded people – this is known as ‘halo recruitment’. But doing so can limit an organisation’s innovation, agility and profitability, especially when thinking differently needs to be the way forward for businesses today.

Because neurodivergent people think and behave differently from ‘neurotypical’ people, they can bring new perspectives and refreshing energy to an organisation. Indeed, companies who’ve embraced a neurodiverse hiring policy have seen enhanced overall employee morale and positive impacts on organisational culture.^{1,4}

On top of this, diverse workforces provide a competitive advantage and are more innovative and profitable according to research.^{1,5}

So neurodiversity is now proven to be helping businesses meet the demands of today’s stakeholders and shareholders alike – and this of course includes the healthcare communications industry.

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 neurodiverse, and highlight the value of diverse perspectives and talents in the workplace.
5. Respect the individual’s privacy and confidentiality regarding their neurodivergence 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.

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

- 40% of self-made millionaires in Britain had a diagnosis of dyslexia⁶
- There is an association between ADHD and an entrepreneurial mindset in business⁷

Seeing strengths within each neurotype

Success in the healthcare communications industry centres around the collaboration of individuals with different forms of intelligence – a team that can think strategically, creatively and analytically.

This is a helpful overview of the natural variations in how neurodiverse individuals think, act, learn, communicate, are motivated and relate to each other depending on the particular characteristic.

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.

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

Embracing neurodiversity: a new management model

Recruitment and retention

As we explained earlier, although hiring neurodivergent individuals can bring benefits to a business, the standardised workplace environment and processes often presents challenges for the individuals themselves.

Hiring and retaining such talent often requires certain reasonable and inexpensive workplace adjustments to ensure a safe, welcoming and productive environment.

Neurodivergent recruitment considerations

Proactively recruiting neurodivergent individuals opens up searches to a wider talent pool. Job postings for neurodivergent individuals should be inclusive, with a carefully considered choice of language and format. Recruitment businesses specialising in neurodivergent recruitment can also provide a useful source of candidates.

When reviewing neurodivergent candidates, it is crucial to avoid seeing underachievement in traditional education systems as a lack of intelligence, talent or potential; always consider their skills beyond academic qualifications. Unconventional career paths are very common in neurodivergent individuals and can count against people in traditional recruitment processes.

At interview stage, the traditional 'question and answer' process does not always suit neurodivergent individuals, such as those with autism. Other methods of getting to know neurodivergent candidates do exist and should be explored fully before beginning any search.

In interview situations, neurodivergent candidates may like to have an advance preview of any questions. And in the interview itself, some people like to have a pen and paper for writing down questions and answers before providing their spoken responses. To help mitigate anxiety, provide information about the interview panel, the format of the interview and the place their interview will take place.

When recruiting neurodivergent individuals, assessing candidates using work sample tests can provide a more accurate predictor of skills than interviews or CVs.

Unconscious bias can also significantly influence the hiring process, leading recruiters to unknowingly favour 'neurotypical' candidates and resulting in the unique strengths and perspectives of neurodivergent individuals being overlooked. To avoid this issue, it's important to provide training to help those involved in recruitment to identify those potential biases within themselves and to avoid them during the process.

Neurodivergent retention considerations

Environment

Many workplaces are simply not set up to support the ability of neurodivergent individuals to thrive in their role.

Educating and training entire workforces, from C-suite to juniors, in hiring and supporting a neurodivergent team member has never been more essential to ensuring future success – not just for healthcare communications leaders and workforces, but also for clients and other stakeholders they serve.

It's also important to be aware that concerns about stigmatisation and a possible lack of understanding from employers and teams may stop individuals from obtaining or disclosing a diagnosis. They may instead make efforts to mask or camouflage their different thinking, which as we've already noted, can be detrimental to their mental and physical health.

Above all, it is vital to recognise that no two individuals are the same. Although some global 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. 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.

Those with a diagnosed neurodivergent condition have legal rights under the “protected characteristics” within the Equality Act 2010. This means employers are obliged to put in place reasonable adjustments to make sure neurodivergent individuals can be as effective in their roles as neurotypical individuals.

Here are some examples of how organisations can make reasonable adjustments in their workplace work 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 find change harder to manage.

Communication

Some of us who are neurodivergent may also benefit from having information presented in different formats such as infographics or illustrations – and they may also digest information at different speeds.

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

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

Career progression

Another key responsibility is to make sure that talented neurodivergent individuals are not missing out on opportunities for career progression – due perhaps to challenges with self-promotion or because of a perception that they wouldn't make effective managers, based on preconceived notions of leadership.

Managers, therefore, should not make any assumptions about the career path a neurodivergent individual will want to take. Similarly, when people management does not fit with an individual's strengths or desires, this shouldn't stop them progressing in their specific technical function. Organisations should look at creating varied career paths that can value and reward a diverse range of employees.

Think 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 encourage more neurodivergent individuals into the industry – people who perceive situations, process information and find focus in different ways.

What can you do to change things?

- Recognise the importance of neurodiversity within your teams and help instil that understanding in others through open discussion and training, using these HCA materials and other available resources
- Develop a strategy to improve the recruitment and retention of neurodivergent individuals...
- But don't just be seen to be 'implementing a strategy': truly root it into your company culture

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]
- **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]

Other relevant organisations

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

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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.⁸

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

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.