

Neuroinclusion in the workplace: the issues that neurodivergent workers face

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A new report on neurodiversity in the workplace finds that noise and lighting issues create barriers for a majority of neurodivergent workers, while experts providing guidance in workplace adaptations demonstrate there is a job of work to be done in changing perceptions of neurodivergence in the workplace.

A new report, *Creating Workplaces Where Everyone Can Thrive* – launched by workplace adaption specialists, Codex, at a Dublin Chamber panel discussion event, this week – sets out how employers can take different approaches to making their workplaces more neuroinclusive.

This can often be simple steps, such as reducing the lighting or noise in an office space, simple signposting, or not requiring someone's camera to be turned on a virtual meeting.

Employers afraid of “getting it wrong” in attempt to accommodate neurodivergent worker

Advice relayed by one neurodivergent worker who was part of the Codex study, was that a truly neuroinclusive workplace could make such ambient tweaks to an office space without having to be requested (such as through the reasonable accommodation route under employment equality law).

The report features findings of research that Codex conducted in conjunction with the AsIAm autism charity, revealing the range of workplace barriers or challenges that are commonly experienced by neurodivergent workers.

The topic also encourages fresh thinking about workplace dynamics, such as conversations at the office water cooler (see below).

Thought leaders on this matter stressed that an individual/case by case assessment approach is best, and that broad assumptions about the needs of neurodivergent workers can be detrimental for both employers and workers.

One such “trap” is assuming that neurodivergent workers would prefer remote working to an office environment; this fails to capture the reality of some neurodivergent people's experience – that the office is their only social environment.

There is a reticence factor; for neurodivergent employees disclosing their condition, and for employers afraid of “getting it wrong” in their attempt to accommodate a neurodivergent worker, as explained by AsIAm CEO Adam Harris at the launch event.

A helpful tool for employers and employees navigating reluctance in declaring neurodivergence is the wearing of the sunflower lanyard, which depicts a hidden disability. Anonymous surveys of employees also have a part to play in this regard, the CEO said.

There is also a perception amongst employers that hiring and accommodating neurodivergent workers will “cost a fortune”, said Mr Harris, who pointed to the various State supports for adapting workplaces, such as the Work and Access Scheme, administered by the Department of Social Protection.

NOISE AND LIGHT

‘Neurodivergent’ means having a mind that functions in ways that diverge from dominant societal norms. It is not a medical term or diagnosis. Neurodivergent is an umbrella term that covers autism, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia and dyspraxia, among many other conditions.

The most reported barrier according to the research is noise in the workplace (61% of 220 respondents), which is associated with sound sensitivity, for example in large or open-plan offices.

The next most reported barrier is lighting, with 56% of respondents citing difficulties associated with brightness, flicker or artificial light sources that hamper comfort and concentration. This is closely followed by social interaction, with 55% highlighting this as a significant area of difficulty.

Other commonplace barriers for neurodivergent employees include written or verbal communication (42% of respondents) while 42% of survey respondents also cited sensory processing requirements that can be heightened by environmental stimuli.

Of all survey respondents, only 4% reported having no additional barriers at work, “underscoring the scale of workplace challenges among neurodivergent employees and the need for more inclusive and adaptive working environments”, Codex says.

The vast majority of those surveyed (94%) agreed that recognising and valuing neurodiversity through education and inclusion initiatives “would help create a more supportive and understanding work environment.”

THREE CATEGORIES

Mark Scully of Braver Coaching and Consulting noted there are three broad categories of neurodivergent: those who don’t know they are neurodivergent, those who know they are neurodivergent but are reluctant to disclose this to their employer, and those who know they are neurodivergent and are willing to ask for reasonable accommodations.

He said that if employers are to be serious about mental health in workplace, they “have to be serious about neuroinclusion”.

Mr Scully said that after his own autism diagnosis, he started to work less hours, which has proven to be beneficial for him.

The Codex report cites the case of UK case of *Saunders v Peloton* in which the London Employment Tribunal found the employer failed to provide reasonable adjustments for the claimant (who experiences sensory overload) in respect of his rest breaks and the requirement he work in public facing areas.

On reasonable accommodation obligations in Ireland, Mr Scully said the approach to take is as per the Supreme Court ruling in the case of *Nano Nagle* (see [Legal Feature in IRN 30/2019](#)).

Once this approach is followed correctly, if a neurodivergent worker is still underperforming you can still “part ways”, as with a neurotypical worker, he said.

STIGMA REMAINS

Claire Twomey, Founder of ADHD Connections, conveyed that conversations about ADHD are not taking place in a lot of workplaces. When they are, they tend to focus on negative aspects and limitations, as opposed to the potential of workers with ADHD.

There is still quite a lot of stigma, she said, perhaps explained by the fact there is a “gap between knowing ADHD exists and knowing what it looks like”

Dr Áine O’Dea PhD, Founder of Radiance Consulting Hub, emphasised the importance of sensory processing for neurodivergent workers and how to make adjustments for an inclusive environment – especially for people who may be neurodivergent but have not been diagnosed as such.

This raises another key point for neurodivergent workers; the time they may have to spend in the workplace whilst waiting for an assessment for a type of neurodivergence, especially autism, which can take several years to secure.

Ms Twomey noted a few other simple measures that can be permitted, such as more movement breaks for desk-based workers, and allowing a different response time from a worker with ADHD.

She highlighted that there continues to be an issue in some workplaces not allowing workers to use noise-cancelling headphones. Neurodivergent people can benefit from having white noise and/or ambient music around them, she explained.

STATE SUPPORTS

The apparent resistance to making workplaces more neuroinclusive is further revealed in surveying that AsIAM has been part of. Mr Harris described the hypothetical case study question on “Ben”, a 25-year old neurodivergent man interviewing for a job at a retail company

Ben’s two requests at the job interview were for to be able to use email rather than phone and to work from 10am to 6pm, rather than 9am to 5pm (to avoid heavier crowds on his commute).

Two in five respondents said they wouldn’t give Ben a job and the same proportion of respondents said his requests were unreasonable.

A key part of encouraging employers to adapt workplaces to be more neuroinclusive is awareness of the various State supports that are available to employers in this regard, such as the Work and Access Scheme (which includes a subsidised ‘workplace needs assessment’) and the Wage Subsidy Scheme for workers with disabilities (the latter was recently amended to widen the net of its application, see [IRN 22/2025](#)).

JOB SPEC AND ‘CURATING’ INTERVIEWS

On the drawing up a job description for a post, Mr Scully advised to think again about whether all the specifications listed for the post are truly necessary. He said also that there is sometimes an expectation that employees must be able to do everything well, when instead of a mixing of strengths amongst a number of workers could be the better way forward.

The process for a job interview was also discussed by the panel. Dr O’Dea suggested that interview questions could be given to candidates prior to the interview, to allow for a “level playing field”.

Mr Harris recommended curating interviews in a different way, concentrating more on what is truly important to the role being advertised, as opposed to a more standard box-ticking for skills (i.e. are communication skills that important for a job that is not about communications).

THE WATER COOLER

The panel discussed the workplace dynamic around the ‘water cooler’ in the office, where decisions can be made.

Mr Harris said that neurodivergent workers “can get lost with idle gossip at the water cooler because it doesn’t add to anything”. But then, when important decisions are made at the water cooler, neurodivergent workers may miss out.

Mr Scully noted that new recruits may not know about the significance of the water cooler because it’s an “unwritten rule” of the workplace.

The Dublin Chamber event MC, Stefanie Preissner, joked that employers should not get rid of the water cooler but could put up a sign that reads: “decisions are made here”.

Codex plans to unveil new products and solutions for a more inclusive workplace at the 14th international Autism Europe Congress in Dublin on 11 September.