



NEURODIVERSITY

GUIDANCE FOR CIVIL SERVICE ORGANISATIONS

INTRODUCTION



Once we accept that we are all different, each with our own strengths and challenges, perspectives change'

CIPD & Uptimize, Neurodiversity at Work, 2024



Neurodiversity is the diversity of human minds including the different ways the brain can work and interpret information. Many of the neurodivergences are often referred to as “hidden disabilities” – it is therefore unlikely you can identify neurodivergence in someone by simply looking at them.

Creating an inclusive environment at work is of paramount importance – a workplace should be a place where people can thrive, work at their best and to their own strengths which will, in turn, boost well-being. Building an inclusive workplace is an ever-evolving journey, and one that leads to enhanced creativity and innovation, improved employee engagement and overall productivity.

There is no universal consensus on language for disability because everyone is different. If you are unsure about a person’s language preference, simply ask them. Your intention to respect their preference and desire to learn will be greatly appreciated.

Typically, identity first language is preferred, as it aims to highlight that people are disabled by the barriers posed to them by society, and not by the condition itself, for example saying “an autistic person” as opposed to “a person with autism”. The former is more positive as it views the person as a whole, where the latter implies there is something wrong with them.



[NDA Advice Paper on Disability Language and Terminology – National Disability Authority](#)



AUTISM

Autism is a developmental condition which means that the way a person communicates, interacts and understands other people, and the world, is different to those who are allistic – which means not autistic. It can be described as a “spectrum” which means it impacts different people, in different ways, to differing degrees at different times and in different situations.

Just as all allistic people are unique, as are all autistic people. There is a well known expression in the community – “once you have met one autistic person, you have met one autistic person”.

Aspergers Syndrome is a diagnostic term that was previously used for some forms of autism. This term is no longer used, and has simply been replaced with the term autism.



AUTISM IN THE WORKPLACE

It is currently estimated that one in 27 people are autistic, but some expect the true number is much higher. However, and astonishingly, research finds that only one in 68 adults in the workplace are autistic. Further research tells us that 85% of autistic adults are either unemployed or underemployed – the lowest of any disability group in Ireland. A 2024 survey carried out by AsIAM tells us that the majority of autistic people feel that the recruitment process is not accessible, and therefore a huge contributor and one of the leading barriers to autistic people when they look for employment.

Some famous autistic people include Anthony Hopkins, Dan Aykroyd, Greta Thunberg and David Byrne

Typical strengths associated with autistic people at work include:

logical thinkers

strong ability to focus and concentrate for long periods of time

punctual, reliable, honest and loyal

great ability to retain detailed information which can result in highly specific interest and technical ability in areas of deep interest

problem solving and analytical thinkinginkers

data driven thinking styles with great accuracy

creativity and innovation

Autistic people have been found to take on 42% more information than non-autistic people. As long as sufficient time is given to process the ask, autistic people can bring a very high level of detail and observation in the workplace.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES FOR AUTISTIC PEOPLE AT WORK CAN INCLUDE:

- finding elements of social interaction challenging such as non-verbal cues, making and maintaining eye contact, shyness or social anxiety
- self-management
- coping with change in their role or workplace can be difficult
- heightened sensory awareness including sights, sounds and smells
- finding changes to routine and structure difficult to process

Work places are social environments. Some autistic people can find this hard and feel the need to “mask” to fit in or be accepted. Masking is exhausting and can contribute to burnout if it is required regularly.

| ADHD

Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is a brain-based condition that affects people's learning and behaviour. Symptoms of ADHD include **inattention** (not being able to keep focus), **hyperactivity** (excess movement that is not fitting to the setting) and **impulsivity** (hasty acts that occur in the moment without thought).

It is estimated that around 3.1% of adults worldwide have a diagnosis of ADHD. Some famous people with ADHD include Justin Timberlake, Adam Levine, Ryan Gosling, Bill Gates, Jamie Oliver and Michael Jordan.



| ADHD IN THE WORKPLACE

Insightfulness, creative thinking and problem solving are strengths often associated with people with ADHD in the workplace. Supports and reasonable accommodations in the workplace for individuals with ADHD can include psychoeducational support such as coaching or skills development, communication skills, executive function skills which can include goal and priority setting, to-do lists and also accommodating regular, short breaks which can potentially boost comfort and productivity for any staff member.

POTENTIAL CHALLENGES FOR STAFF MEMBERS WITH ADHD CAN INCLUDE:

Feeling **restless, easily bored and distracted** with tasks that they may find are not sufficiently stimulating. They may also experience challenges with regard to **sustaining attention and maintaining focus** during long meetings or switching focus between tasks. Additionally, some individuals with ADHD might experience challenges with executive functions such as **time management, organisation, planning, task initiation or self-efficacy**.

These challenges are at risk of being misinterpreted as a lack of motivation or capability, rather than being understood as symptoms of ADHD.

| DYSLEXIA

Dyslexia is a learning difference that can cause difficulties with reading, spelling, writing and related cognitive / processing challenges. It occurs on a spectrum with some people mildly affected and others more severely. Everyone with dyslexia is different but there is a commonality of difficulties with phonological processing, rapid naming, working memory and reading, spelling and writing difficulties. The impact of dyslexia can change according to the environment (i.e. what a dyslexic person is being asked to do and under what circumstances).

It is estimated that at least one in 10 people are thought to be dyslexic. Some famous people with dyslexia include Richard Branson, Keira Knightley, Steven Spielberg, Maggie Aderin-Pocock, Jackie Stewart, and Jennifer Aniston.



| DYSLEXIA IN THE WORKPLACE

Most roles in the workplace involve some level of reading, writing and remembering. Planning and organising, setting out timetables, distinguishing between the important and the urgent, remembering appointments, passing on telephone messages from memory and meeting deadlines can be difficult for many people with dyslexia. However, the same thinking style that can present challenges in the workplace to people with dyslexia can also bring such strengths. Skills such as big-picture, 'out of the box' thinking, lateral thinking and problem-solving, visual strengths and an intuitive understanding of how things work are often key traits of dyslexic people.

Simple workplace adjustments can be significantly beneficial, e.g.

- ✓ **meeting minutes provided in advance**
- ✓ **assistive technology**
- ✓ **accessible documentation**
- ✓ **extra time**
- ✓ **inclusive working environments**



DYSPRAXIA

Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD), commonly known as dyspraxia, is a complex neurological condition affecting fine and / or gross motor skills, motor planning and coordination, organisation skills, memory, sequencing and social and emotional skills.

It is estimated that at least one in 17 people are dyspraxic. Some famous people with dyspraxia include Jane McGrath, Daniel Radcliffe, David Bailey, and Florence Welch.



DYSPRAXIA IN THE WORKPLACE

Some individuals with dyspraxia may have developed their own strategies for coping in the workplace. Some may have difficulties with organising their workload, memory and concentration, communication, following oral instructions, handwriting or using equipment. Some people with dyspraxia can be extremely resourceful and determined problem-solvers. They also tend to be good at 'big picture' thinking, pattern spotting and inferential reasoning.

Some strategies at work that can support people with dyspraxia can include

- ✓ **time management skills**
- ✓ **plenty of advance warning for deadlines**
- ✓ **breaking down tasks and projects into manageable chunks**
- ✓ **written instructions rather than oral**
- ✓ **regular movement breaks to aid focus and concentration**

| DYSCALCULIA

Dyscalculia is a learning difference that can cause difficulties with core mathematics. People with dyscalculia can have difficulty with an intuitive grasp of simple number concepts or 'number sense'. They can have difficulties estimating the magnitude of numbers and can struggle with understanding number relationships.

Dyscalculia is often experienced alongside dyslexia and / or dyspraxia and prevalence is estimated at around 5%.



| DYSCALCULIA IN THE WORKPLACE

There are simple strategies that can support an individual with dyscalculia in the workplace, including providing a **process map** so that someone doesn't have to remember any sequence of steps, or if comparing graphs, numbers and statistics, having **two screens** can be very helpful.

| DYSGRAPHIA

Dysgraphia is a condition which refers to someone experiencing difficulty with writing; both with the physical act of writing but also with the ability to write coherently. It may impact a person's ability to express what they would like to express through writing or writing information accurately.



MANAGING WITH DIGNITY AND RESPECT

The Civil Service is required to meet the minimum target of 6% employment of people with disabilities in 2024 / 2025, and this can only be achieved through openness, transparency and recognising diversity, not only as a strength, but as a huge advantage in the workplace. Managers in the workplace can affect huge change, setting a standard for support that encourages difference, creativity and innovation. (Oireachtas.ie & NDA.ie).

Managing a diverse team with dignity and respect involves creating an inclusive and supportive environment, where each member feels valued and empowered to contribute their best. All teams consist of unique perspectives, communication styles, and work preferences. Some key strategies in being a good manager to a diverse and neurodivergent team are:

1. Educate Yourself and the Team

Understand neurodiversity: Educate yourself and your team about neurodiversity, recognising that everyone has different needs and abilities. This awareness can help reduce misunderstandings and create a more inclusive environment.

Consider introducing training, for example Understanding Neurodiversity in the Workplace for all staff and also specific People Manager training in this area to ensure you are both supporting your neurodivergent team members and also accessing their strengths.

2. Embrace Individual Differences and Examine your own Management Style

Understand the unique strengths, preferences, and potential challenges of each team member and try to focus on what each team member excels at, assigning tasks that align with their strengths. This approach can enhance both productivity and morale.

3. Create a Supportive Work Environment as Much as is Feasible

Clear communication: Be explicit in your expectations and provide written as well as verbal instructions to accommodate different communication preferences.

Offer flexibility where possible: Consider flexible working hours or locations, as some neurodivergent employees might perform better in less traditional settings.

4. Create Safe Channels for Feedback

Provide multiple ways for employees to share feedback or concerns. Some team members might prefer written communication over speaking up in meetings

5. Respect Privacy and Confidentiality

Respect boundaries: Not everyone may be comfortable disclosing their neurodivergent status. Respect privacy and avoid pressuring team members to share personal information.

Confidentiality: Keep personal information confidential, unless explicit permission is given to share it for workplace accommodations or team awareness

6. Model Empathy and Patience

Lead by example: Demonstrate respect, patience, and empathy in all interactions. How you respond to challenges and setbacks sets the tone for the entire team.

Encourage empathy among team members: Share stories and experiences (while maintaining confidentiality) to build empathy and understanding within the team.

By focusing on these principles, you can create an environment where dignity and respect are central to your management approach, ultimately helping each team member thrive in their roles and contribute meaningfully to the team's success.

DISCLOSURE

A workplace disclosure of challenges or a diagnosis can be difficult to navigate, even for someone who experiences psychological safety in their workplace. However, for someone who does not feel as secure in their role / workplace the thought of disclosure can be overwhelming. The latter can be the case for many neurodivergent individuals who may have faced misunderstanding about the challenges they experience.

AslAm.ie report that six in 10 neurodivergent people are afraid to be open about their diagnosis in the workplace. This research tells us something about the way in which employers are struggling to support their neurodivergent employees.



New Research: six in 10 autistic people afraid to disclose in the workplace. – AslAm.



Neurodivergent individuals may have struggled their whole lives with the challenges they face and the barriers in society when accessing employment, services or healthcare. People, in general, know what their challenges are and usually know what would support that challenge, but often aren't sure how a request might be perceived or simply what might be practically possible in a workplace.

An effective manager should make time for their employee and speak to them about any challenges they may have and what they feel they need. There may be accommodations that are not possible, but any that are reasonable should be considered for the benefit of the person's wellbeing, contribution to the team and the overall team morale.

REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS

Reasonable accommodations are supports that can be put in place to enable and support the employee to fulfil their role. While accommodations for physical disabilities may be more visibly obvious, it's important for managers and HR departments to recognise the invisible challenges that neurodivergent individuals may face. The accommodations they might benefit from are likely less visible or even invisible. The neurodivergent person may struggle with understanding vague communication, processing large amounts of information (verbal or written, for example) or responding to social cues. Instead of struggling with this, workplaces can help employees in this situation.

By working with the person to understand their experience of the world, not dismissing it when it is different to our own, we can help to provide tailored, simple and typically no-cost support to colleagues, such as some of the below examples:

- It's important to remember that *every* team is neurodiverse. No two brains are alike.
- Create an environment that welcomes and supports disclosure and discussion.
- Respect an individual's choice of whether they want to disclose or not. There is no duty to disclose.
- Your response to any disclosure is critical – have conversations in private, listen, if the staff member is upset show empathy and understanding, take time to reflect, you may wish to speak with your manager, DLO, HR and CSEAS.
- Be positive to difference – embrace the opportunities and focus on strengths.
- Value all staff members equally.
- Ask the staff member if they need any support/ what supports they might need or if there is anything you can do to assist
- Maintain dignity for your staff member in your approach and do not disclose the information without their consent.

- Don't assume that the individual's neurodivergence means that their overall abilities or work quality are affected. There is no correlation between intelligence and the prevalence of ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia or any other related aspect of neurodivergence.
- Remember, even if someone has worked with you for years, just because it is new information for you, doesn't mean it hasn't already been affecting them for years – they are still the same person, but now you have a greater understanding of them and how different experiences affect them, and most importantly what you can do to support them in the workplace.

SOME EXAMPLES OF REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS AND SUPPORTS IN THE WORKPLACE CAN INCLUDE:

ADAPTING

the premises or the equipment, e.g., installing wheelchair ramps, lifts, corridors and spaces free from obstacles, assistive technology / assistive listening devices / screen reading software/ screen magnification software such as ZoomText / Speech to text dictation software, adding dimmer switches to manage light levels.

COMMUNICATION

Sometimes a neurodivergent person may struggle with vagueness, innuendo, sarcasm and figurative speech. Phrases like "paddle your own canoe" or "the early bird gets the worm" relating to workplace duties may pose a challenge because they lack context and relevance. For some, these phrases can also distract from what you are saying, as they start to visualise the strange image and then miss an important part of your message. To ensure equity for all in the workplace, employees and managers are encouraged to use clear, direct communication to avoid confusion.

*Example of **vague communication** from a manager:*

John, can you do that task in your own time, and have it done around 5pm.

Taken literally, this might be understood as: do the task outside of work and anywhere from 4:30 – 6:00pm is an acceptable deadline. What the manager *meant* to say was – **“John, could you please have the task completed and on my desk by 5pm today?”**

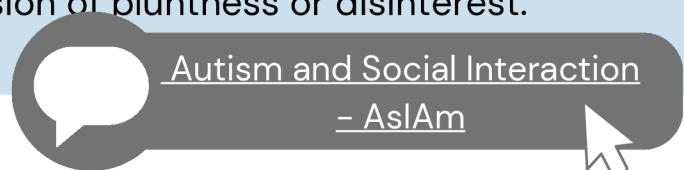
SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

Social communication may be difficult for some neurodivergent individuals. It is important to remember that autistic people often approach non verbal communication differently in comparison to neurotypical individuals. They may not use or interpret hand gestures the same way as a neurotypical person. Due to differences in eye contact, an autistic person might look away from the person they are speaking to. This can be confusing for those who are not used to speaking with autistic people. However, it is good to understand that removing the eye contact can help to reduce the social pressure, avoiding a sense of overwhelm and therefore enables the autistic person to better listen and respond to you.

Secondly, some neurodiverse individuals are likely to be comforted by routine and predictability.

Conversations with new people may be intimidating, especially if they happen in an unfamiliar environment. For example, an autistic person may be adept at interacting in a classroom or workplace but might not know how to approach someone at a party or a sports game. However, if you know that person has a special interest, that can be a great way of engaging with them and getting to know each other, as this will be a topic they feel comfortable and confident speaking about.

Thirdly, some neurodiverse individuals are often direct and straightforward in how they communicate, avoiding generic conversation topics in favour of topics they find meaningful. This can result in giving an impression of bluntness or disinterest.



INFORMATION PROCESSING

People process things differently, that's a fact. Neurodivergent brains are no different. In the workplace, it's important to be mindful of the needs of your team and the way information is dispersed. For example, someone with dyslexia might struggle to process a large agenda when handed meeting notes at the start of the meeting. The reasonable accommodation would be, where possible, to provide the notes and agenda to the attendees ahead of time so that they can familiarise themselves with it.

SENSORY PROCESSING

Sensory overload can happen when intense sensory stimulus overwhelms an individual's ability to cope. This sensory overload can be triggered by a single event, e.g., an unexpected loud noise, or it can build up over time due to the effort it can take to cope with sensory sensitivities in daily life. Sensory overload can feel like intense anxiety, a need to escape the situation or difficulty communicating. When the brain has to put all of its resources into sensory processing, this can affect other functions, like speech, decision making and information processing.

Understanding what a person needs and how they need to be supported in times of stress is key to supporting sensory overload. The support required will vary from person to person but it might be a few minutes on their own to recharge, a movement break or to do their work in a quiet area, or go for a short walk or another repetitive behaviour that helps to soothe them.



Autism and Sensory Processing-
[AslAm](#)



OTHER EXAMPLES OF REASONABLE ACCOMMODATIONS CAN INCLUDE:

- Flexible working / blended working, if possible
- Assigning an employee certain tasks, and substituting others for equivalent duties, in consultation with the employee
- An accessible website and internal network systems
- Colour-coding of files
- Rest space or room for employees
- Location of desk / workspace

- Adjustable lighting
- Extra time on certain tasks
- Brainstorming in twos or groups
- Alternative office furniture such as a height-adjustable desk or ergonomic chairs
- Flexi-time
- Job sharing
- Induction and continuous training. For some, the functionality of the standard office suite and being proficient in it, and basic computer skills like typing, would be a significant support
- Notes, agendas and handouts given out in advance, with expectations clearly communicated
- Allow audio recorders at training sessions
- Be aware that individuals learn in different ways, and when training people, you may have to adjust your teaching methods and communication styles
- Written materials in alternative format, such as in large print or electronic (e.g. MS Word .doc) format



The employer is not obliged to provide anything that the person would normally provide for themselves. For example, an employer would not be expected to provide hearing aids for a person with impaired hearing.

In order to know which appropriate measures to put in place, it is important to understand all of the different needs of a neurodivergent employee, which can be gained by having a conversation with the individual and through guidance from supports available. It might not be necessary to provide certain types of appropriate measures if it means that the employer would suffer a 'disproportionate burden'.



Individual and team attitudes, behaviours, beliefs and assumptions all greatly influence a culture in a workplace. Employees want to feel connected to their colleagues, to feel part of a team, and to the overall mission and core values.

Important questions to ask are how **psychologically safe** do team members feel? If a team member wanted to **disclose** a disability or learning difficulty, how **easy** or **difficult** would this be for them?

HOW THE CSEAS CAN HELP

The CSEAS is a nationwide Employee Assistance Service available to all civil servants. The CSEAS provides a non-judgmental, confidential and free service where every individual will be met with empathy and understanding. The CSEAS provides a safe space to discuss any challenges a client is experiencing both in the workplace and in their personal lives.

Employee Assistance Officers have the training and expertise to work collaboratively with employees, offering support to those who are neurodivergent and experiencing difficulties in the workplace. The CSEAS is available to support managers in embedding a culture of wellbeing and inclusion within their organisation and in supporting their colleagues.



Civil Service Employee Assistance Service

4th Floor, St. Stephen's Green House | Earlsfort Terrace | Dublin 2 | D02 PH42

☎ 0818 008 120

✉ cseas@per.gov.ie

🌐 www.cseas.per.gov.ie

This document aims to educate and initiate conversations about neuroinclusion in the Civil Service. It is a living document and will grow and be updated in line with EDI developments within the Civil Service. The language in the document is not reflective of any one individual and may differ from individual preferences.



| LIST OF SOURCES CONSULTED / RESOURCES

Ahead, Demystifying Disability in the Workplace

<https://www.ahead.ie/userfiles/files/shop/pay/DemystifyingDisabilityInTheWorkplace.pdf>

<https://www.ahead.ie/employer-accommodations>

CIPD, Neurodiversity at Work Guide, 2018

<https://www.cipd.org/en/knowledge/guides/neurodiversity-work/>

CIPD and Uptimize, Neurodiversity at Work, 2024

<https://www.cipd.org/en/knowledge/guides/neuroinclusion-work/>

Dr. Nancy Doyle, 2022, Neurodiversity and Disability Discrimination at Work, Forbes

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/drnancydoyle/2022/05/10/neurodiversity-and-disability-discrimination-at-work/>

<https://abilityfocus.ie/>

<https://asiam.ie/>

<https://adhdireland.ie/>

<https://www.cipd.org/en/knowledge/guides/neurodiversity-work/>

<https://www.dyspraxia.ie/>

<https://dyslexia.ie/>

<https://www.ibec.ie/influencing-for-business/diversity-and-inclusion>

IHREC, Disability and Reasonable Accommodation

<https://www.ihrec.ie/guides-and-tools/human-rights-and-equality-for-employers/what-does-the-law-say/disability-and-reasonable-accommodation/>

<https://irishcentrefordiversity.ie/>

<https://ncse.ie/>

<https://neuroqueer.com/neurodiversity-terms-and-definitions/>

UCD, Managers Guide to Disability and Reasonable Accommodations

<https://www.ucd.ie/equality/t4media/Managers%20Guide%20to%20Disability%20and%20Reasonable%20Accommodations.pdf>