

# Workplace Environment Adjustments to Support Autism & Neurodiversity

Employing Autistic individuals provides many benefits across all levels, from the business case, to innovation, to culture, and most importantly, to economic stability for those who may fall outside of the status quo.

These benefits within organizations, seen when workspaces are inclusive and responsive to neurodiversity factors such as Autism, also positively influence the entire community, which then further benefits individuals and organizations.

Of course, you want to be a leader in that shift, **but how can you respond to the unique needs of Autistic workers to create an inclusive workplace that celebrates and benefits from neurodiversity?**

## First...briefly pause and prepare:

Before going into the full answer to the question above, keep in mind the following points of how to strategically respond to gaps and opportunities for inclusion, as well as the process of editing current, outdated ideas, practices, and procedures.

Keeping these considerations at top of mind allows for you to implement a sustainable and meaningful inclusion plan for integration of inclusion strategies for Autism & Neurodiversity:

- Start small
  - **Select one area, goal, or strategy to begin with.** Rome wasn't built in a day, and with sustainable implementation, successful inclusion of Autism & Neurodiversity in the workplace will give you the opportunity to see how this inclusive approach to the workplace will benefit Autistic workers as well as have positive impacts to all other workers within your organization.
  - **Reach out for help, coaching, consulting for any questions or other support needs you may have** as you work to implement inclusive strategies, practices and procedures within your workplace. While champions of neurodiversity within organizations is essential to inclusion, no one person can do it all themselves. Set up a plan for support from your leadership in the organization, and also don't hesitate to connect with Autistic-run and focused advocacy and workplace support resources. The best ally for neurodiversity is one who is an **accomplice**, working side by side with Autistic folks, not who feels the need to caretaker them.

- **Be open to viewing accommodations and adjustments within the workplace the way you might view necessary structural renovations and repairs to a building that otherwise would not be safe to enter. [It is based on need, not preference](#):** Often the term “accommodation” can come with heavily negative stigma, and be associated with ideas like “expensive”, “special treatment”, and “burden”. If the structure of a building is found to not be conducive to safe occupancy, it is repaired and renovated, no judgement placed on that. It is an expected and accepted practice of maintenance. The traditional workplace, through it’s structures, culture, policies, and procedures have not been conducive to Autistic and Neurodivergent workers to thrive in the way their non-neurodivergent peers do. Accommodation and adjustment is simply a renovation, repair, and update to make it so.
  
- **Regular, intentional self-reflection practice.** Self-reflection and metacognition on how aware a person is about how they think, how they learn, how they reason, what their EQ is, and what areas they would like to work on within themselves is a highly refined professional skill. This skill is essential to all EDI practice, including neurodiversity in the workplace. Here are a few details to consider within yourself and in your practice as a leader, manager, co-worker, citizen, etc.
  - **Bias** – both conscious (what you know), and unconscious or implicit (what you didn’t realize was a way you were making decisions, communicating, and evaluating your world from a place of bias).
  - **Ableism** – what it is, how it is practiced, how current institutions and systems actually support the continuation of ableism that intentionally excludes those with disability.
  - **Redefine “Disability”** – it is an adjective, one that only exists in comparison to able-bodied folks. This doesn’t mean that disability is a negative term, and the majority of Autistic folks will identify with Autism being a disability. However, the meaning that is often attached to the term “disability” is one that is elitist, and often used as a reason to practice ableism. The term “disability” is neutral, and does not measure the quality of a person, their right to dignity, their skills and strengths, their intelligence, or their value within society and the workplace.
  - **Oppression, Equity, Inclusion, Accessibility**
  - **How to position yourself within the discussion of disability**

**[Tips and Resources for how to learn more will be covered in upcoming modules.](#)**

## Okay, Let's Dive In:

There are a few key areas to consider when looking to shift workplaces to inclusion of Autism & Neurodiversity. There are two very common practices used in inclusion training that provide a framework for adjusting workplaces to be more inclusive for Neurodiversity. They are:

- **Universal Design** (most often related to the physical setting, but can also help inform process and procedure development) [click the link to learn more<sup>1</sup>](#).
- **Inclusive Design** (informs the development of systems, procedures, environments, culture, and compliments the Universal Design framework on how to operationalize inclusion) [click the link to learn more<sup>2</sup>](#).

**Universal and Inclusive Design methods are shown to be beneficial to both those who need the adjustments, as well as everyone else who can choose to utilize them based on preference.**

Mentioned below are some areas within the workplace to consider where you can practice Universal & Inclusive Design. Tips and strategies have been included where helpful.

Autistic & Neurodivergent workers have specific needs for how their brains process the world around them. Research shows that up to 90% of Autistic & Neurodivergent folk experience sensory differences to environmental inputs such as sound, light, smell, texture, etc. It is also documented that workers with these sensory differences are able to thrive and be productive within the workplace with open access to judgement-free adjustments that work for them.

Some specific needs identified by Autistic & Neurodivergent workers to consider are:

**Distractions** – distractions occur regularly within workplaces and are one of the main causes to lower productivity for employees of all neurotypes and backgrounds. This can be even more pronounced when the employee has a brain wired to need more time to transition between tasks and activities in general.

### Universal/Inclusive Design Tips<sup>3</sup>

It is important to:

- Design, or designate, spaces with options for work style and sensory differences that provides flexibility for Autistic & Neurodivergent workers, but also offers the same flexibility to all workers.
  - Ex. Areas for focus, areas for concentration, and the creation of tech-free zones to escape constant notifications and screen time.

- Empower all employees to utilize the right solution that meets their specific needs.
  - Ex. Noise-cancelling headphones for focus, closing office door (or going into enclosed workspaces) for concentration, work in areas with non-tech resources (ex. whiteboards, desks without desktop computers, staff rooms without tvs, etc.).

Regarding systems and processes, it is important to consider offering to all employees:

- Designated “focus time” blocks in schedules where interruptions and meetings are minimized.
- Flexible work offerings
  - Ex. work from home, flexible work hours, etc.)
- Options to provide input and feedback that aren’t only verbal or in-the-moment
  - Ex. Providing questions and meeting content ahead of time so folks have time to look through it all and to consider what they would say; clearly communicate that folks can choose how to provide their input and feedback through a few different modalities, such as: verbally, live chat in Zoom calls, over email before or after a meeting, through a survey, through a poll, etc.

**Sensory Stimulation** – when an individual lives with sensory differences, the process of engaging in environments that those without sensory differences consider “average” can be very overwhelming to their nervous systems. This overwhelm is not a response that is within the person’s direct control, so having a space where you can control sensory stimulation is important<sup>3</sup>. with judgement-free, open access to adjustments that work for them to regulate their own nervous systems, employees are then able to thrive in the workplace.

Check out this video for one example of some of possible sensory experiences for folks with sensory differences<sup>4</sup>...



### Universal/Inclusive Design Tips

- Intentionally cultivate a culture of choice and normalizing different styles of work.
  - ex. Employees choosing to wear noise-cancelling headphones is considered a normal and acceptable thing, working alone in a closed office is not believed to be indicative of “not being a team player”, etc.
- Provide opportunities for ergonomic and sensory-based adjustments be made to the physical environment.
  - ex. Employees can turn off their overhead lights, use weighted blankets or pillows on their laps, be able to wear sensory-friendly fabrics and clothing at work, take a 5 min break in a sensory room to regulate and then return to work, etc.
- Consider the colors and arrangement of physical spaces in the workplace
  - ex. Muted tones on the walls will be less visually over-stimulating and promote more concentration, sound dampening dividers help with open office space noise, etc.

**Wayfinding** – many Autistic and Neurodivergent folks need environments that “make sense” based on predictability, clarity, and repetition when navigating a space. This is also a preference for most employees.

### Universal/Inclusive Design Tips<sup>3</sup>

- Ensuring clear lines of sight, viewpoints, and clear indicator (ex. internal staircases or mezzanines) will help a person orient themselves in a space.
  - Ex. clean signage in accessible font to exits, elevators, stairs, etc.; Use of art and sensory-friendly wall colour to act as memorable landmarks; various levels of lighting to indicate spaces, such as brighter lighting in areas folks need to travel safely from place to place, with control to lower lighting in spaces they are stationary in to work, etc.
  - **Additional tip for signage:** Using universal icons instead of only text is a powerful and inclusive wayfinding strategy. Below are a couple of examples.



Utilizing Universal and Inclusive Design methods may bring some new, innovative practices into organizations, but they will also benefit the largest number of employees and employers, all while providing a space for Autistic & Neurodivergent workers to thrive.

## References

1. *The 7 principles*. Centre for Excellence in Universal Design. (n.d.). Retrieved January 14, 2023, from <https://universaldesign.ie/what-is-universal-design/the-7-principles/>
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4. The Guardian. (2017, October 7). *The Party: A virtual experience of autism – 360 film*. YouTube. Retrieved January 14, 2023, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OtwOz1GVkDg>