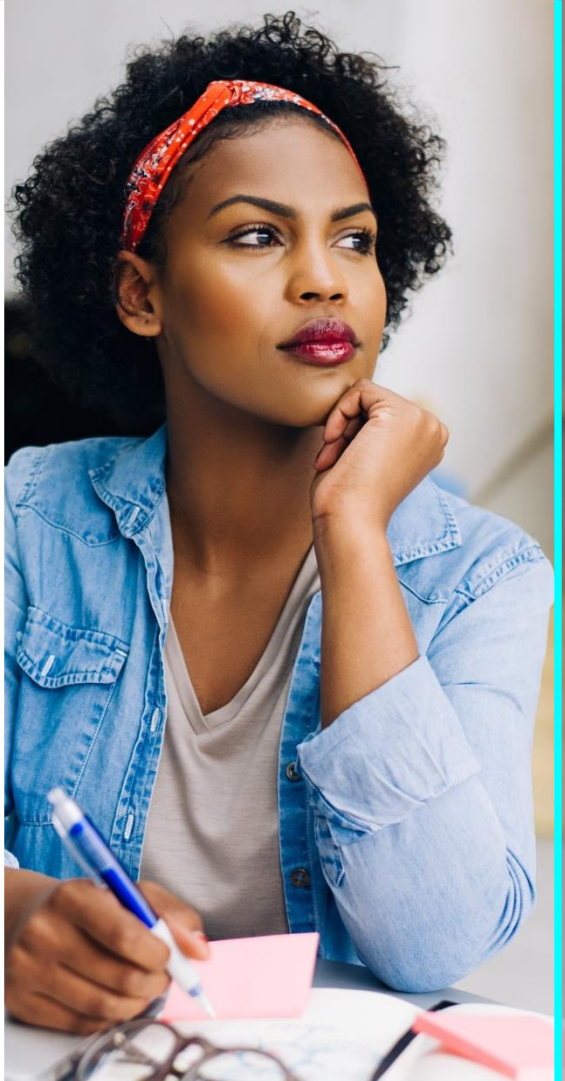
Capita

Embracing Neurodiversity

A Capita Skills and Learning report



Foreword

Embracing neurodiversity

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion initiatives have found themselves in the spotlight over the past few years, in part driven by much-needed social movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo. And while there is a clear imperative for organisations to respond to the current discourses within society and tackle bias in all forms, when it comes to the DE&I agenda, neurodiversity seems to have historically received little attention. Yet it is estimated that 1 in 7 people within the UK are neurodivergent; an incredibly significant number.

There are, however, signs that the narrative is changing. For example, you may have seen the campaign from ITV and Scope to highlight invisible disabilities featuring various celebrities including individuals with ADHD. The recently published book by Theo Smith and Amanda Kirby offers a welcome selection of insights and guidance around Neurodiversity at Work, and there is a general feeling of more openness around neurodiversity and mental health at work.

As Neurodiversity celebration week takes place between March 13th – 19th, in this report we look to how organisations can embrace neurodiversity as part of the DE&I agenda, and incorporate strategies to educate employees and address the potential bias that exists within our societies and organisations.

Creating neuroinclusive learning experiences

Beyond looking at the benefits and considerations for organisations in creating inclusive workplaces we also look to the question – is learning inclusive for neurodiverse groups? What might not make it inclusive, and how we can design experiences that are accessible and effective for all?

We need to admit that there is no standard brain, just as there is no standard flower, or standard cultural or racial group, and that, in fact, diversity among brains is just as wonderfully enriching as biodiversity and the diversity among cultures and races.

- Thomas Armstrong, The Power of Neurodiversity (1)

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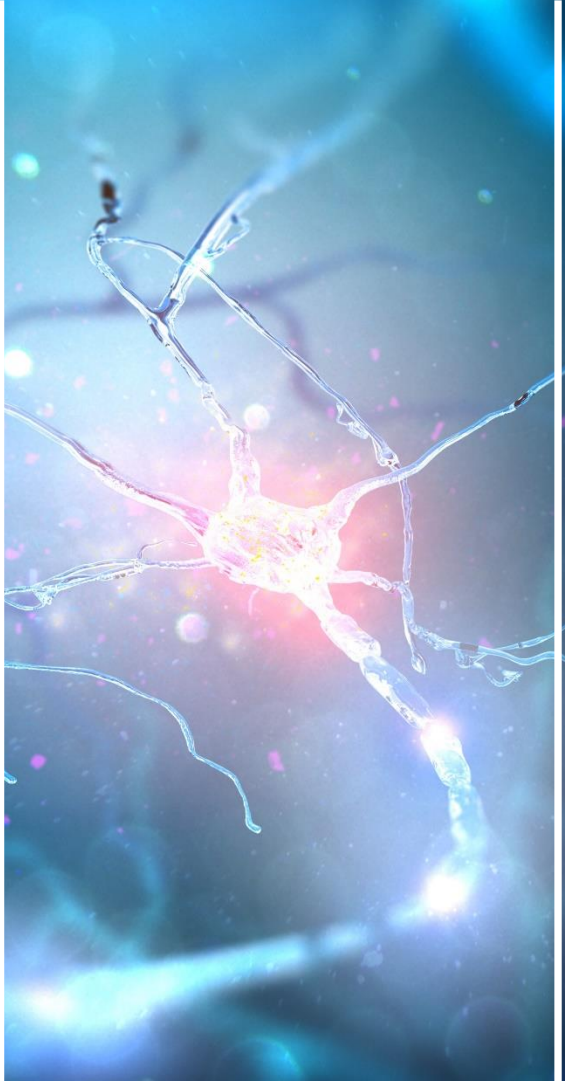
Subject matter experts & resources

Experts in the field of neurodiversity and a resources toolkit

Understanding neurodiversity

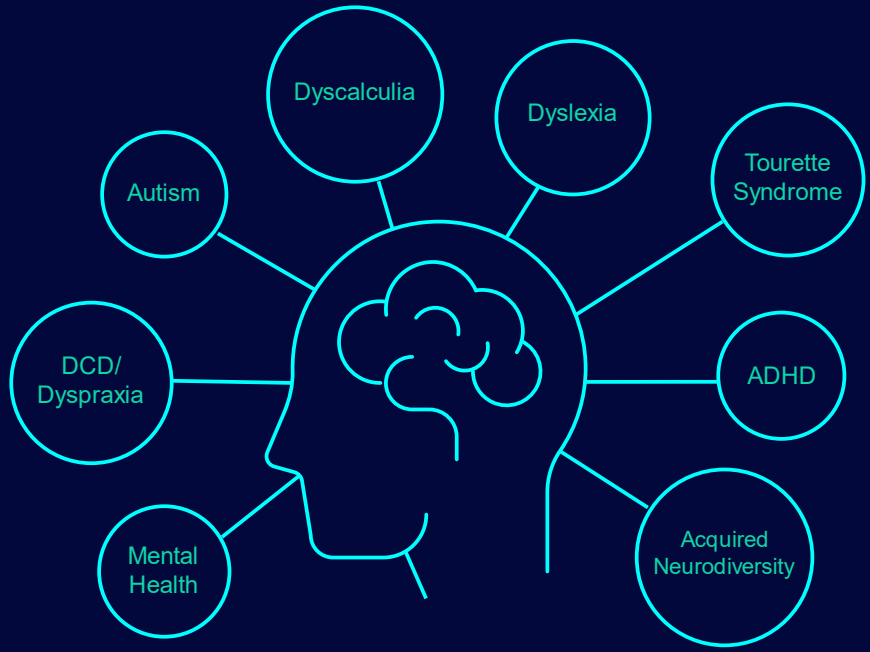


Understanding neurodiversity

Neurodiversity can be described as the diversity or variation of cognitive functioning in humans. It is also used to represent a fast-growing sub-category of organisational diversity and inclusion that seeks to embrace and maximise the talents of people who think differently.

Often termed ‘neurominorities’ these are some of the neurodiverse / neurodivergent conditions that typically fall under the umbrella of neurodiversity:

- Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
- ADHD
- Dyslexia
- Dyscalculia
- DCD / Dyspraxia
- Tourette Syndrome
- Acquired Brain Injury
- Mental Health



We are all neurodiverse

“People you work with will all think differently, see things differently, sense things differently, move differently and do things differently from others. No way is right or wrong, but we sometimes assume that most people see, do and act like us, and we don’t always consider that someone may be sensing the world differently.” – Neurodiversity at work (3)

The 1990s

is when the term ‘Neurodiversity’ is thought to have been coined by Australian sociologist Judy Singer

1 in 7

people are neurodivergent (4)

Only 22%

of autistic adults in the UK are in full-time employment, according to the National Autistic Society. However, their research also shows that a significant majority (77%) of unemployed autistic people say they want to work (5)

About 1 in 3

people in prison are neurodivergent (6)

1 in 20

Have ADHD. Around 1% have a diagnosis (7)

1 in 4

For every female diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), approximately four males receive a diagnosis (8)

10%

Of the population are dyslexic (9)

9 in 10

People with Tourette’s have ADHD (10)

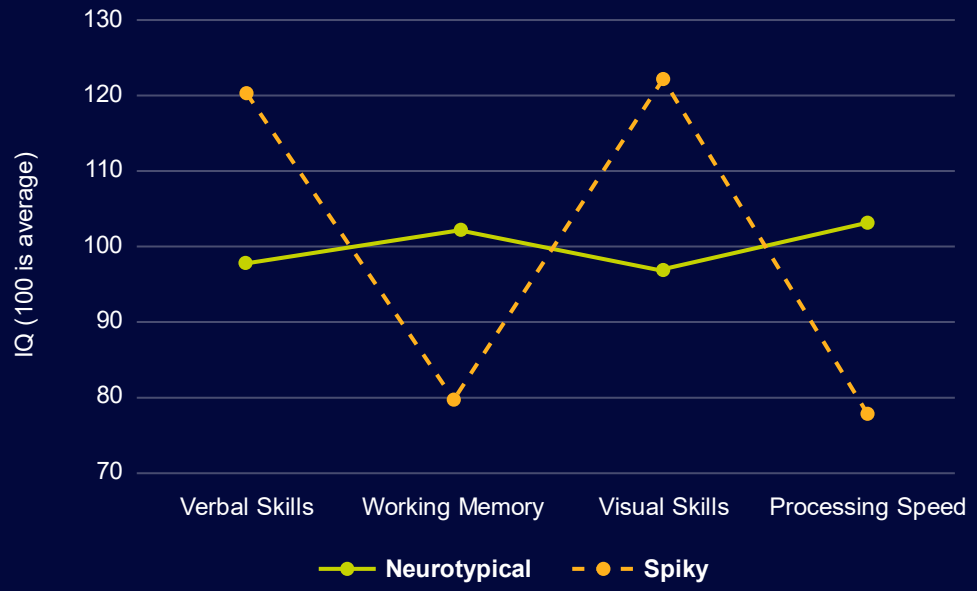
Understanding neurodiversity

Terminology can be tricky to navigate and overwhelming, which is understandable. Incorrect use of terms can however be damaging and alienating, so it's important to learn and keep up to date with the correct language. It's also important to note that what's considered 'correct' may differ for some people. Here are some key terms to navigate conversations about neurodiversity.

Neurodiversity	Neurodiversity is the diversity of human brains and minds – the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species. It is a biological fact, not a perspective, belief or paradigm.
The neurodiversity paradigm	A perspective that posits neurodiversity as the result of natural human variation, and that there is no one 'normal' brain type. Contrasts with the highly medicalised perspective (until recently, the dominant perspective) that views autism, ADHD and others as 'disorders' to be treated.
Neurodiverse	A group of people is neurodiverse if one or more members of the group differ substantially from other members, in terms of their neurocognitive functioning. For example, if within a family there are members with different neurocognitive styles, e.g. some are neurotypical, one has ADHD and one is Autistic. Neurodiverse is often mistakenly used when talking about individuals who are neurodivergent.
Neurodivergent / neurodivergence	Neurodivergent, sometimes abbreviated as ND, means having a brain that functions in ways that diverge significantly from the dominant societal standards of 'normal'. **Neurodivergence** (the state of being neurodivergent).
Neurotypical (NT)	The opposite of neurodivergent. **Neurotypical** means having a style of neurocognitive functioning that falls within the dominant societal standards of "normal", recognising there is no "normal" brain. Neurotypical can be used as either an adjective ("He's neurotypical") or a noun ("He's a neurotypical").
Neuroinclusive	Designed to include both neurodiverse and neurotypical groups.

‘Spiky profiles’

Understanding spiky profiles is a useful way of explaining the differences associated with neurodivergent conditions and neurotypicals. For example, while someone neurotypical may function cognitively across a fairly stable profile, a neurodivergent individual is more likely to experience high peaks and dips in cognitive functioning.



This image is adapted from the British Psychological Society report on Psychology at Work, and depicts scores from the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale, which provides clear guidance on the level of difference between strengths and weaknesses that is typical or of clinical significance. Scores are used to support a diagnosis of dyslexia, Developmental Coordination Disorder (DCD, previously referred to as ‘dyspraxia’, and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and to understand the cognitive ability of an employee following injury or illness.

- extract from from Doyle, N. (2020). Neurodiversity at work: a biopsychosocial model and the impact on working adults. (11)

Neurodiversity at work

Creating neuroinclusive organisations

Why is it important?

An ethical, moral, and legal responsibility – employers can no longer exclude such a significant demographic

Attracting, optimising and retaining talent – 'Walgreens report turnover costs plummeting through their much-admired disability hiring initiatives' (12)

'Diversity of thought' – embracing creative thinkers and developing innovative solutions

Greater employee engagement across all employees – 'Neurotypical people report that involvement makes their work more meaningful and their morale higher' (14)

Increased productivity – JPMorgan reports that 'after three to six months working in the Mortgage Banking Technology division, autistic workers were doing the work of people who took three years to ramp up – and were even 50 percent more productive' (13)

Customer benefits – 'at SAP, a neurodivergent customer-support analyst spotted an opportunity to let customers help solve a common problem themselves; thousands of them subsequently used the resources he created.' (15)

Neurodiversity across the organisational lifecycle

Highlighting the potential challenges for neurodiverse professionals across some of the key stages of the organisational lifecycle helps to unpick the various ways organisational structures and processes may not be set up appropriately and inclusively.

Neurodiverse hiring

"For many neurodivergent people, the interview is the greatest barrier to getting a job." (16)

Hiring processes are problematic for a number of groups, including neurodiverse. This may not be explicit bias, but unconscious and lead to discriminatory practices that hinder neurodiverse groups from entering the workforce. For example, Prof Amanda Kirby highlights that there is specific evidence of 'tests in an interview that have been shown to be biased against some people and where alternatives have not been offered.'

Neurodiversity and performance management

It's critical that organisations and managers develop equitable approaches to managing performance of all teams, including neurodiverse groups.

'With the management of diversity increasingly expected of line managers, it seems line manager practice in this highly specialised and emergent facet of diversity deserves far more research than is currently afforded.' (18)

The work environment

Environmental elements such as light, sound, and smell can cause particular discomfort for some neurodiverse individuals, The design of working environments is therefore a critical factor for neurodiversity.

A Microsoft report also suggests that remote working presented challenges particularly acute for neurodivergent professionals, where sensory stimuli in the home office, workspace setup, and getting into the mindset of working when surrounded by home could all make it difficult to focus. (17)

Neurodiversity and leadership

In 2009, Professor Julie Logan reported that 35% of entrepreneurs were dyslexic versus 1% of corporate managers. Evidence also suggests that people with ADHD are more likely to start businesses than neurotypical peers – however, representation in management and leadership levels in corporate settings is scarce. (19)

Neurodiversity at work

Being aware of some of the coping strategies neurodiverse colleagues may adopt can help to promote a more supportive and empathetic culture within the workplace. Here are two examples.

Stimming

The word ‘stimming’ refers to self-stimulating behaviours, usually involving repetitive movements or sounds. Common stimming behaviours include: biting your fingernails, twirling your hair around your finger, cracking your knuckles or other joints, drumming your fingers, tapping your pencil, jiggling your foot, whistling.

For neurodivergent colleagues stimming may be a coping mechanism that sims to alleviate anxiety or decrease sensory overload for example.

It’s therefore important for teams and managers to recognise what might be driving behaviours and try to eliminate or reduce any clear triggers. This could include:

- Ensuring a calming environment
- Creating a sense of routine
- Encouraging and supporting acceptable behaviours
- Not reacting negatively or punishing stimming behaviours

Masking and mental health

Many neurodiverse people learn to hide or ‘mask’ their challenges, and therefore may be struggling in ways that are not apparent to others. It’s thus important to not judge their need for support, or assume everything is fine based on your own observations. There is also evidence to suggest that women may be more likely to engage in masking than men.

Masking can consume a vast amount of energy and over time this can be detrimental to mental health. For this reason, employees may need to break down tasks and learning into smaller chunks and take regular breaks; ‘intensive’ programmes may not be suitable. On the other hand, an obsessive special interest may need to be indulged intensively, with time to rest and recuperate afterwards. Checking in regularly with an employee in a way that doesn’t make them feel singled out is important, and ensuring that everyone is aware of any sources of support for mental health and wellbeing.

“We are often still thinking in silos: while specific campaigns are crucial, there also needs to be focus on intersectional campaigns. We don’t all fit into one category or another. There is no one-size approach. It is impossible to understand the development and training needs of each person without fully understanding the opinions and experiences of people who are working in variable settings.”

– Neurodiversity at Work, Amanda Kirby & Theo Smith

Neurodiversity and learning

Approaching neurodiversity learning

Diversity learning as a whole is often criticised for failing to deliver impact, for example in the case of the government pulling the plug on unconscious bias training after realising little success. So, how can we effectively educate teams and individuals about neurodiversity and neurocognitive differences within the workplace, and see real change, as part of wider DE&I efforts?

Depending on the desired outcomes for diversity learning initiatives there may be three areas which are fundamental to all forms of diversity training. It's important to recognise which lever you're trying to pull in order to understand what success looks like, and recognise that focusing purely on one is unlikely to achieve impact:

Affect: changing attitudes towards other/disadvantaged groups such as neurodiverse colleagues

Cognition: increasing knowledge, including knowledge of terms, conditions, etc.

Behaviour: changing the way employees behave towards other/disadvantaged groups including neurodiverse colleagues

Learning interventions may take the form of -

Neurodiversity awareness learning for all	**Manager specific learning**	**HR / recruitment specific learning**	**Consultancy solutions, e.g. neuro-inclusion assessment**

Some of the general considerations we recommend for approaching any form of learning around neurodiversity include:

- Engaging with experts
- Considering the wider culture and organisational approach to neurodiversity
- Considering integration with mental health support
- Ensuring alignment with wider DE&I efforts

Designing inclusive learning

In the same way that designing office environments taking a universal design approach benefits all, so too does this approach to learning. It isn't about designing interventions for different groups, for those with dyslexia or those with ADHD separately for example, but adopting a human-centric approach and considering - what works best for everyone?

Terminology. If you are creating learning specifically around neurodiversity, be mindful of language and avoid generalisation. We list a few key terms in this report, but there are many you can find online to check you are up to date.	**Avoid overstimulation.** As with the environment, neurodiverse employees may struggle with bright lights, colours, or loud repetitive noises for example. Try to avoid sensory overload in both F2F or digital scenarios and forms of learning that create anxiety.
Avoid timed information activities. Neurodiverse groups may prefer to go at their own pace and take different lengths of time to assimilate information, either going faster or slower. Try to avoid this kind of time pressure.	**Avoid figurative language.** Language such as metaphors, similes and irony may be difficult to interpret for neurodivergent individuals who may interpret language that has intended nonliteral meanings. This can also be difficult for non-native English language speakers too.
Be aware of masking and mental health. Don't assume that a learner is happy with an environment or learning set up as they may be 'masking'. Check in regularly with learners in a way that doesn't make them feel singled out, and consider chunking learning down into smaller pieces and taking regular breaks. Equally, an area of particular interest for neurodiverse learners could be suited to more intensive learning, but be mindful of time for rest afterwards.	**Keep up to date with general accessibility standards.** Ensuring compliance with WCAG 2.1 guidelines will support inclusive learning for all, such as no videos over 6 mins, and considering practical adaptations and interactive learning.

Neurodiversity and adult learning opportunities

Understanding Autism

As part of our adult funded learning opportunities through vision2learn we offer a free Level 2 course on Understanding Autism.

This popular course is designed for learners who wish to develop an understanding of autism and how to support individuals with autism.

Learning outcomes:

- ✓ Learn about what is meant by autism, theories and diagnosis
- ✓ Learn about using a person-centred approach to support individuals with autism
- ✓ Develop your understanding of communication and social interaction in individuals with autism
- ✓ Learn about sensory processing, perception and cognition in individuals with autism
- ✓ Learn how to support positive behaviour in individuals with autism
- ✓ Learn how support individuals with autism to live healthy and fulfilled lives

We also offer a course on Children and Young People's Mental health.

Subject matter experts

Subject Matter Experts

Neurodiversity experts - there are various organisations, companies and individuals specialising in neurodiversity some of which we highlight here.

Individual names to know

- Professor Amanda Kirby
- Theo Smith
- Professor Nancy Doyle
- Professor Almuth McDowall
- Kirstie Kelly
- Thomas Armstrong
- Judy Singer
- Victoria Honeybourne
- Aidan Healy
- Henry Shelford
- A further list of names and partners recommended by Scope here

DO IT.

National Autistic Society

Lexxic

uptimize

British Dyslexia Association

DAIVERGENT

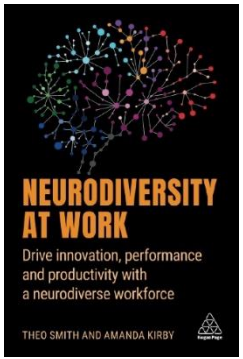
Genius WITHIN

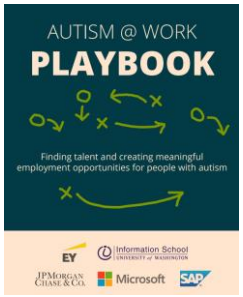
Dyspraxia UK

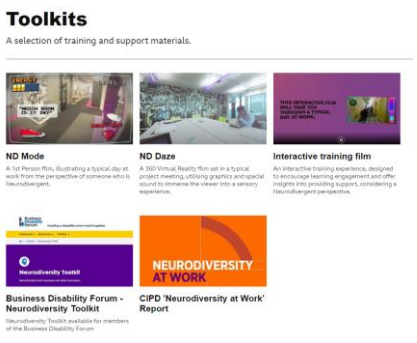
ADHD UK

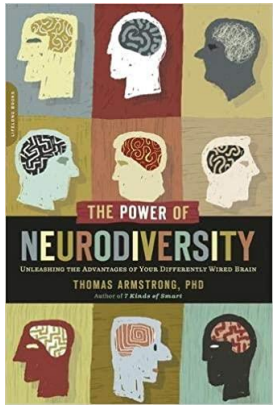
A neurodiversity toolkit

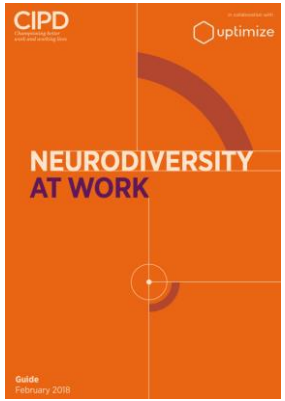
Some highly recommended resources











Neurodiversity at Work by Theo Smith and Professor Amanda Kirby

BBC's Neuro-Inclusive toolkit provides a guide to the different sensory responses to an environment that people may experience

The Power of Neurodiversity by Thomas Armstrong

The Neurodiverse Workplace by Victoria Honeybourne

CIPD report Neurodiversity at Work

Microlink – supporting workplace adjustments and accessibility

Autism @ Work Playbook co-created by Global EY, SAP, Microsoft and JPMorgan Chase for employers

A Conceptual Analysis of Autistic Masking, by Amy Pearson and Kieran Rose

SAP's Autism Inclusion Pledge aims to connect with untapped talent and autistic individuals seeking employment

Birkbeck UoL centre for neurodiversity research

Neurodiversity may be every bit as crucial for the human race as biodiversity is for life in general.

Who can say what form of wiring will be best at any given moment?

- American journalist Harvey Blume

Summary

Embracing neurodiversity

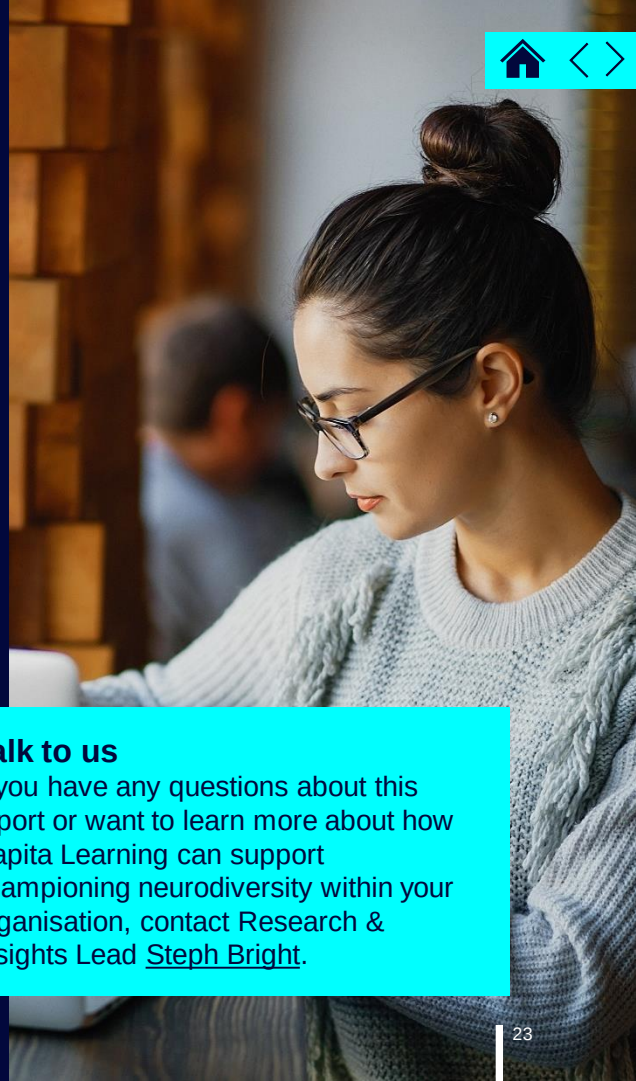
It's clear that neurodiversity needs to move up the organisational agenda.

The need for innovation, for new ways of thinking, and for greater diversity of thought is more important now than ever before as organisations strive to remain competitive advantage in an increasingly complex and uncertain world. Not to mention the need to be empathetic in a world that can be more and more challenging for us all.

The increasing role of the organisation as a socially responsible driving force should also encourage companies and individuals to consider their actions towards inclusivity and the impact they can have through their ethical and moral obligations.

The implications for employee wellbeing and mental health are also paramount, as we know that neurodiverse employees may be more likely to struggle with their mental health.

Ultimately, we need to reset our ways of thinking and recognise that there is no one way of thinking. We need to consider, how can we be more accessible for all? Reflecting on this question will allow us to provide the right support mechanisms, to create more inclusive practices, including learning practices, and to increase the ways in which we recognise and maximise the talents of those who think differently.



Talk to us

If you have any questions about this report or want to learn more about how Capita Learning can support championing neurodiversity within your organisation, contact Research & Insights Lead Steph Bright.

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Thank you.

Sources

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