Supporting *Neurodivergence*

In the workplace

The Academe

Lucy Cox and Lerryn Clare
The Academe

In today's dynamic work environment, fostering inclusivity is no longer a "nice-to-have"—it's essential. For small and medium enterprises (SMEs), this means creating a space where all employees, including those who identify as neurodivergent, can thrive.

Neurodivergence refers to variations in brain function and behavior, encompassing conditions such as autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and more. While neurodivergent individuals often bring unique strengths to the workplace, they also face distinct challenges that require thoughtful support.

For neurodivergent employees, navigating the workplace can be overwhelming. Sensory sensitivities, communication differences, and the need for structure may clash with traditional work environments. Many fear disclosing their needs due to stigma or misunderstandings, leading to burnout or underperformance despite their potential.

For leaders, supporting neurodivergent team members presents its own challenges. Many SMEs lack the resources of larger corporations and may not know where to begin. Questions like "How do I balance individual accommodations with team goals?" or "Am I doing enough to create an inclusive culture?" are common. Without guidance, well-meaning efforts might miss the mark, leading to frustration on both sides.

Yet, the benefits of getting it right are immense. Studies show that diverse teams are 35% more likely to outperform competitors. Neurodivergent employees often excel in areas like problem-solving, creativity, and attention to detail, provided their needs are met. Businesses that champion inclusivity not only retain top talent but also foster innovation and boost team morale.

This PDF is our practical guide to building a neurodivergent-friendly workplace. From communication strategies to workspace adjustments, we'll explore actionable steps that empower both employees and leaders. With the right approach, your SME can unlock the full potential of neurodivergent talent—fueling growth, collaboration, and success.

Did you know we offer in-house training for teams and leaders on exploring neurodivergence in the workplace? Get in touch or visit www.theacademe.co.uk

The Research

Neurodivergence in the Workplace

Research highlights the critical role neurodivergent individuals play in workplace success, particularly in small businesses where each employee's contribution has a tangible impact.

A 2019 study by Deloitte found that inclusive workplaces are six times more likely to be innovative and agile, a crucial advantage for SMEs navigating competitive markets.

Neurodivergent employees often excel in areas such as pattern recognition, creative thinking, and problem-solving. For instance, dyslexic individuals frequently demonstrate exceptional big-picture thinking, while employees with ADHD may bring unmatched energy and adaptability.

However, challenges remain. Research by the National Autistic Society revealed that only 22% of autistic adults are in full-time employment, despite 77% wanting to work.

Workplace barriers, including a lack of understanding, inflexible policies, and sensory-unfriendly environments, contribute to this disparity. Similarly, employees with ADHD or anxiety disorders may struggle with time management or communication in traditional settings. For SMEs, these challenges can strain limited resources, as leaders juggle competing priorities without clear guidance.

Despite these hurdles, the business case for inclusivity is compelling. Neurodivergent teams often approach problems differently, providing innovative solutions that traditional perspectives may overlook. Moreover, inclusivity boosts retention, reducing recruitment costs—a key concern for smaller enterprises.

By addressing barriers and fostering understanding, SMEs can transform these challenges into opportunities. Investing in neurodivergent-friendly practices doesn't just benefit individuals; it creates a stronger, more adaptable organisation.

As two neurodivergent founders, we understand first-hand the challenges of both working as part of, and leading teams in high-pressured environments.

Good to know

The Academe

Common forms of neurodiversity in the workplace

When we talk about neurodiversity, we don't JUST mean Autism and ADHD (although these are often the most commonly disclosed in the workplace). Here is a quick guide to what is covered under the term 'neurodivergence';

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD):
Autistic individuals often excel in logic, detail-oriented work, and problem-solving. They may prefer structured environments and clear communication. However, social interactions or sensory overload can be challenging. The National Autistic Society reports that only 22% of autistic adults in the UK are in full-time employment, despite their many workplace strengths.

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD):
ADHD can bring creativity, adaptability, and energy to the workplace. Employees with ADHD thrive in dynamic environments but may struggle with focus, time management, or organisation. Around 2.5% of UK adults have ADHD, yet many remain undiagnosed, leading to feelings of frustration or underachievement.

Dyslexia:
Dyslexia affects 10% of the UK population, with 4% experiencing severe challenges. It impacts reading, writing, and processing information but is often linked to exceptional creativity and strategic thinking. Dyslexic employees may need additional time for language-based tasks but excel in innovation and lateral thinking.

Dyspraxia (Developmental Coordination Disorder):
Dyspraxia affects motor coordination, organisation, and memory. Around 5-6% of the UK population is affected, with 2% severely impacted. Dyspraxic employees may face difficulties with physical tasks but are often highly empathetic and resourceful.

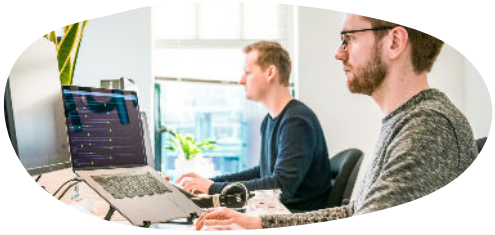
Anxiety Disorders:
While not always classified as neurodivergence, anxiety disorders frequently intersect. In the UK, 8 million people experience anxiety, often excelling in detailed planning but struggling in high-pressure environments.

Other neurodivergences include Dyscalculia (an impaired ability to understand, recall, or use numerical information), Dysgraphia (difficulty with writing), Tourette syndrome (a disorder that involves involuntary movements and vocalizations called tics), Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) and stammering.

The Academe

Five ways to...

Create an Autism-friendly workplace



1 Provide Clear Communication

Autistic employees often thrive when expectations are clear and direct. Use straightforward language in meetings, emails, and instructions. Avoid ambiguous phrases or idioms that may be misinterpreted. When delegating tasks, break them into manageable steps, and ensure priorities are well-defined.

2 Create a Structured Environment

Structure and predictability can help autistic team members feel more comfortable and focused. Provide consistent routines, clear schedules, and advance notice of changes whenever possible. Use visual aids, like calendars or flowcharts, to make workflows easier to understand.

3 Be Mindful of Sensory Sensitivities

Workplaces can be overwhelming for those sensitive to noise, bright lights, or strong smells. Create sensory-friendly spaces by offering noise-cancelling headphones, adjustable lighting, or quiet rooms for breaks. Allow flexible seating arrangements or remote working options to accommodate individual preferences.

4 Encourage Open Dialogue

Foster an environment where employees feel safe to disclose their needs. Approach conversations with empathy and confidentiality, and listen without judgment. Regular check-ins can help identify any adjustments or support required for success. Avoid assuming all autistic individuals have the same needs—personalisation is key.

5 Focus on Strengths, Not Challenges

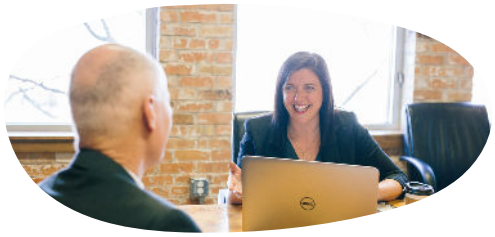
Autistic individuals often excel in detail-oriented work, pattern recognition, and creative problem-solving. Match tasks to their strengths and provide opportunities for skill development. Recognise achievements and contributions to build confidence and foster a sense of belonging.

We have valuable first-hand experience of Autism, with one of our founders being Autistic, having three Autistic children and Autistic wider family members, plus we have supported many businesses to better understand and support Autism in the workplace.

The Academe

Five ways to...

Create an ADHD-friendly workplace



1 Offer Flexible Work Options

Employees with ADHD often thrive in environments where they can tailor their work habits to their strengths. Allow flexibility in hours, task prioritisation, and workspace arrangements. Remote working or alternative schedules can enable them to work during their most productive times.

2 Break Down Tasks and Set Clear Deadlines

Large projects can feel overwhelming to individuals with ADHD. Break tasks into smaller, manageable steps with specific deadlines. Provide written instructions and use tools like project management software or checklists to help them track progress. Regularly review priorities to keep things on track.

3 Minimise Distractions in the Workplace

A quiet, focused environment can significantly benefit employees with ADHD. Provide access to noise-cancelling headphones, private workspaces, or flexible seating options. Encourage a balance between collaborative and individual workspaces to reduce overstimulation.

4 Encourage Movement and Breaks

ADHD employees may benefit from physical activity to refocus and recharge. Allow frequent, short breaks and encourage activities like walking meetings. Provide access to standing desks or even exercise equipment if feasible. Movement can enhance creativity and concentration.

5 Recognise and Leverage Strengths

Employees with ADHD often excel in creative problem-solving, innovation, and handling high-pressure situations. Assign tasks that tap into these strengths, such as brainstorming sessions or crisis management. Celebrate their achievements and provide constructive feedback to build confidence and motivation.

BONUS: Consider the five ADHD Motivators to help to get the best from your ADHD team members; Interest, Novelty, Challenge and Urgency. Designing tasks and accountability based on these key motivators will help get the best from your ADHD team members.

The Academe

Five ways to...

Create an Dyslexia-friendly workplace

1 Provide Accessible Communication

Employees with dyslexia may struggle with dense text or traditional written formats. Use clear, concise language in emails, documents, and instructions. Offer alternatives such as verbal explanations, visual aids, or video recordings. Tools like speech-to-text software can also enhance accessibility.

2 Utilise Assistive Technology

Assistive tools can significantly boost productivity for employees with dyslexia. Software such as Grammarly, Read&Write, or text-to-speech programmes can support writing and reading tasks. Ensure these tools are available and provide training on how to use them effectively.

3 Focus on Strengths and Creativity

Dyslexic individuals are often strong in problem-solving, big-picture thinking, and innovation. Assign tasks that leverage these strengths, such as strategy development or creative brainstorming. Highlight their contributions to build confidence and demonstrate their value to the team.

4 Offer Flexible Work Practices

Allow employees the time and resources they need to complete tasks effectively. Flexible deadlines, adjusted workloads, and the option to collaborate with others can make a significant difference. Avoid penalising them for needing extra time on reading-heavy tasks.

5 Promote a Culture of Support

Encourage open conversations about workplace needs and provide reassurance that seeking help is welcome. Offer training for all team members on dyslexia awareness to foster understanding. This helps create a collaborative environment where employees feel respected and empowered to contribute.

Many people with a neurodivergence will have been subjected to a lifetime of criticism and rejection, often fuelling low self-esteem. This will make them extremely cautious to discuss their neurodivergence unless they feel safe enough to do so. Our workshops offer a safe space for individuals to share their experiences and design a workplace that works for them.

The Academe

Five ways to...

Create an Dyspraxia-friendly workplace

1 Provide Clear Instructions and Visual Aids

Employees with dyspraxia may find verbal instructions or complex tasks challenging to process. Use written guides, diagrams, or flowcharts to supplement verbal explanations. Breaking tasks into smaller, manageable steps with clear deadlines can also help reduce confusion and build confidence.

2 Offer Adjustments to Workspaces

Dyspraxia can affect motor coordination and organisation. Ensure workspaces are accessible and free of clutter to minimise physical challenges. Provide ergonomic equipment, such as supportive chairs and keyboards, to improve comfort. If required, allow flexible desk arrangements to accommodate individual preferences.

3 Be Flexible with Deadlines and Task Allocation

Some tasks, particularly those requiring quick coordination or multitasking, can be more challenging for employees with dyspraxia. Allow additional time for tasks when needed and be open to reallocating responsibilities within the team to leverage their strengths, such as problem-solving or creative thinking.

4 Encourage Organisation Tools

Support the use of tools that aid organisation, such as digital planners, reminder apps, and task management software. Encourage the use of checklists or colour-coded systems to help employees manage their workload effectively and stay on track.

5 Promote Understanding and Inclusivity

Raise awareness about dyspraxia within your team to foster empathy and collaboration. Encourage open conversations about individual needs, ensuring employees feel comfortable discussing any challenges they face. Training managers and team members on neurodiversity helps create a supportive and inclusive culture.

The common misconception is that Dyspraxia is simply poor coordination, when in fact it is so much more than that. Check out the Dyspraxia Foundation at www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk for more information.

The Academe

Five ways to...

Create an Anxiety-friendly workplace

1 Foster a Calm and Predictable Environment

Uncertainty and sudden changes can heighten anxiety. Wherever possible, provide advance notice of significant changes to schedules, workloads, or team structures. Create a calm work environment by encouraging respectful communication, reducing unnecessary noise, and managing workloads to avoid overwhelming employees.

2 Encourage Open Communication

Create a culture where employees feel comfortable discussing their challenges without fear of judgment. Regular one-to-one meetings can provide a safe space to check in on their well-being and offer support. Reassure employees that seeking help or discussing their needs will not negatively impact their role or progression.

3 Provide Flexible Work Options

Anxiety can manifest differently for each individual, and flexibility is key to accommodating their needs. Offer options such as remote working, flexible hours, or the ability to step away for breaks during high-stress periods. Giving employees autonomy over their schedules can help them manage their anxiety more effectively.

4 Offer Mental Health Resources

Provide access to mental health resources such as Employee Assistance Programmes (EAPs), counselling services, or mindfulness training. Sharing information about available support and encouraging its use demonstrates your commitment to their well-being.

5 Focus on Strengths and Positive Feedback

Employees with anxiety often excel in roles requiring attention to detail, planning, and empathy. Recognise and celebrate their contributions to build confidence and reduce self-doubt. Offer constructive feedback in a supportive manner to avoid triggering unnecessary stress.

Anxiety can affect us all at some point in our lives. It is complex and highly personal impacting everything from our sleep, digestion, health and ability to sleep. It is caused by a broad range of factors including hormones, trauma and is considered a co-morbidity for other neurodivergences.

The Academe

Want to get more support?

Creating an inclusive workplace involves understanding and utilising the wealth of support available for neurodivergent employees in the UK. Here are some key agencies and resources:

Access to Work
Run by the Department for Work and Pensions, Access to Work provides funding for workplace adjustments for employees with disabilities, including neurodivergence. Support can include assistive technology, specialist coaching, or covering the cost of travel if public transport is challenging. Applications can be made online by the employee or employer.
Website: www.gov.uk/access-to-work

The National Autistic Society (NAS)
The National Autistic Society offers resources for employers, including training on autism awareness and advice on workplace adjustments. Their Autism at Work programme helps businesses develop inclusive hiring practices and support autistic employees. Website: www.autism.org.uk

British Dyslexia Association (BDA)
The BDA provides guidance on creating dyslexia-friendly workplaces, including tailored training sessions, workplace assessments, and assistive technology recommendations. Their Helpline offers free advice for employees and employers. Website: www.bdadyslexia.org.uk

Dyspraxia Foundation
The Dyspraxia Foundation offers information for employers on supporting employees with dyspraxia. They provide factsheets, training, and advice to help businesses create more accessible work environments.
Website: www.dyspraxiafoundation.org.uk

ADHD Foundation
The ADHD Foundation provides employer resources, including training on managing ADHD in the workplace. They also offer strategies for productivity and advice on reasonable adjustments to meet the needs of employees with ADHD. Website: www.adhdfoundation.org.uk

Mind
Although primarily focused on mental health, Mind offers valuable support for employees with anxiety and overlapping conditions. Their workplace wellbeing resources include guides on managing stress and promoting mental health. Website: www.mind.org.uk

Who you gonna call?

Great question.

We are lucky to have so many proactive agencies working in the UK to support neurodivergent individuals, however searching for team and leadership resources from national institutions can be tedious and result in generic, tick-box information that risks alienating your neurodivergent team members even further. The name of the game is to create safe workplaces where powerful conversations can happen.

This is where specific, tailored support can come into it's own.

So why work with The Academe?

Knowledge and Experience
Any neurodivergent member of your team will understand the terms 'hyper-focus' and 'special interest', and the topic of neurodivergence is both of those things for us. We not only deeply research and understand this topic from an intellectual perspective, we live our own neurodivergence experience (including managing neurodivergent families) giving us a unique inside-out/ outside-in perspective.

We understand the complexities of running a business (we run one too!). We have been senior leaders in our various careers, and accumulated qualifications in business, leadership, psychology and coaching. The Academe is now in it's fourth year and we are proud to have worked with businesses and individuals from over 20 different countries.

Award-winning
Don't just take our word for it! We were awarded 'Business Training Provider of the Year 2023' in the Business Awards UK, 'Best Employee Development Program' in the same ceremony, plus were finalists in the NatWest EVIE Awards, the National HUSTLE Awards, the Venus Awards and the Westcountry Women Awards. We are so proud of the work we do and are honoured to be recognised for the impact that we make on leaders and teams around the world.

Why work with The Academe?

Creating a Safe Place

There is a fine balance between educating people and creating space for them to feel safe and heard, yet this is what we do best. Our sessions are fun, supportive, informative and inclusive, and we get surprisingly deep conversations going which are not only hugely helpful to the individuals, but equally beneficial to the organisations who come back to us time and time again.

"It was recommended that I get in touch with The Academe to hear about their services and I am so glad I did! They have not only been incredibly warm and friendly, but also deliver excellent workshops, bring THE energy to the room and go above and beyond to deliver great work. I highly recommend The Academe's services, they have been fantastic to work with."
Zoe Ibrahim, Kamwell

Flexibility and Tailoring

Whether you want a 45 minute keynote, a mini-workshop for your team day, or a 12-week intensive leadership intervention, we are always happy to work within your brief and budget to create something that simply works. We appreciate that every business is unique and there won't be a one-size-fits-all. We work WITH you to create the best experience for your team and your inclusion mission.

Human

Neurodivergence aside, we are just all humans trying to do the best we can with what we've got. We all want to be great leaders, successful entrepreneurs and valuable employees. At The Academe we see everyone as human first and bring this philosophy to all our sessions.

Exceptional Value

We do more than you expect and are not as expensive as you think! Plus everything we offer comes with a full money-back promise if you are not completely happy.

Get in touch with us today and let's discuss how we can work together in 2025 to create your neurodivergent-friendly workplace.

Email: hello@theacademe.co.uk
Web: www.theacademe.co.uk