

GOOQUAL

The Neuroinclusion Imperative

Unlocking Untapped Potential

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Foreword

Over the course of our careers, we've seen neurodivergent professionals (including ourselves) bring fresh thinking, exceptional contributions, and deep commitment to their work. We've also seen good intentions misread, relationships broken, and performance questioned for reasons that had nothing to do with capability—and everything to do with perception.

The stories gathered in this research echo in our own lives: We see our colleagues. Our friends. Our children. Ourselves. They reveal the emotional labor of working in a system that doesn't recognize you, and the toll of masking just to get by. They also reveal what becomes possible when people are authentically seen for how they think, contribute, and engage.

This project has changed us: how we think, listen, and lead. We hope it changes you, too.

We've always known there was more potential in the room than traditional talent approaches could see. This research illuminates what has always been there, waiting to be activated.

Alongside the lived experiences in these pages, you'll find practical shifts any organization can make to build trust, reduce friction, and unlock potential. This is a call to rethink how we work, not by fixing people, but by redesigning systems to make room for more kinds of brilliance.

If you're a leader, this report will show you what performance really looks like. If you've ever felt out of step with workplace norms, it may remind you that you're not alone—and that there is nothing wrong with your mind.

We're grateful to every person who shared their story with us. Their honesty has given us language, perspective, and a path forward. Now we invite you to walk that path with us, because there is too much at stake to continue with business as usual.

Signed,



Jennie Glazer,
CEO of Coqual



Isis Fabian,
Research Lead

Methodology

The primary sources of data for this research report were a series of virtual focus groups and one-on-one interviews with neurodivergent professionals. Supplemental quantitative insights were gathered via a brief web-based survey fielded to qualitative research participants. The survey was distributed by Coqual using Qualtrics's survey platform.

In total, we collected qualitative insights from 60 neurodivergent focus group participants and interviewees, who were sourced from sponsoring companies and the professional networks of researchers. Qualitative insights were supplemented by semi-structured interviews with subject-matter experts, an initial literature review, and ongoing desk research. Names of interviewees throughout were changed to protect the anonymity of participants.

To capture a full range of the neurodiversity present in organizations, participants did not require a formal diagnosis to identify as neurodivergent. The majority of our qualitative sample is composed of professionals with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or autism (ASD); however, other conditions were also represented, such as dyslexia, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), anxiety, and complex post-traumatic stress disorder (CPTSD).

Artificial intelligence (AI) use disclaimer: The research team for this report used AI platforms, including ChatGPT, to assist with citations and proofreading. All sources cited were manually verified, and all content was authored by the research team.

Glossary of Terms

Accommodations: Adjustments that remove barriers to access and participation for individuals with disabilities. Workplace examples include flexible scheduling, noise-canceling headphones, and written instructions. Accommodations are individualized and can be formal or informal. They are less stigmatizing when offered proactively as flexible options available to everyone.

ADHD: Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by differences in attention regulation, impulsivity, and energy levels.¹ Most people with ADHD use “ADHD” as an adjective to describe themselves, even if they don’t identify with the wording of the expanded term.

AuDHD: A term used by people who identify as having both autism and ADHD. This overlap is common but underrecognized in clinical settings.

Autism/ASD/autistic: A neurodevelopmental difference that affects communication, sensory processing, and social interaction. Many autistic people prefer identity-first language (“autistic person”) over person-first (“person with autism”), though preferences vary. The medical label “autism spectrum disorder (ASD)” is still used clinically but is not universally embraced.²

High versus low support needs: A way of describing the varying levels of support neurodivergent people may require.³ Unlike “high-functioning” or “low-functioning,” which falsely assume needs based on projections by outside observers, “support needs” highlights that an individual may excel in some contexts while needing help in others.

Masking: The act of suppressing or camouflaging neurodivergent traits.⁴ Masking can include imitating neurotypical social behaviors, hiding soothing repetitive movements (known as self-stimulating behaviors, or “stims”), or forcing facial expressions.

Neurodivergent: A term for anyone whose brain processes, learns, and/or behaves differently from what is considered typical. By default, this includes anyone diagnosed with ASD, ADHD, or any other mental health condition or neurodevelopmental difference. It also includes anyone who identifies as neurodivergent, regardless of their diagnostic status. Some people prefer terms like “neurodistinct,” “neurodiverse,” or playful slang like “neurospicy”; in this report, we use neurodivergent as an umbrella term encompassing all of these.

Neurodiverse: A descriptor for a group of people, both neurodivergent and neurotypical, who together represent a broad spectrum of neurotypes. Note that some people use this word as a personal identifier in place of “neurodivergent.”

Neurodiversity: The concept that variations in human brain function are a normal, natural part of human diversity, and that there is no universal “right” way for a brain to function.

Neuroinclusion: The practice and policy of making workplaces adaptive enough to embrace and enable whatever talent walks in the door, expanding ways of working such that all participants in a given team or culture can contribute and co-create at their full potential.

Neurotypical: A term for anyone whose brain processes, learns, and/or behaves in a way aligned with what is considered typical (i.e., not neurodivergent).

Universal design: An approach to accessibility that makes systems, spaces, and tools usable by the widest possible range of people. This approach emphasizes built-in accessibility (e.g., captions available for all videos, sidewalks with curb cuts) and reduces the need for individual accommodations.⁵

Introduction

Neuroinclusion is a business imperative.

Neurodivergent professionals bring a wealth of the sought-after skills and out-of-the-box brainpower most needed today—yet most companies still run on rigid ways of working that bury these strengths, fuel attrition, and erode trust.

In the US today, nearly one in five people (19%)—and nearly 30% of those under 30—identify as neurodivergent.⁶ The full population is likely even larger, given how many remain unaware of or hide their differences.⁷ As we will explore in this report, despite the size and talent of this population, most companies today continue to marginalize those who display neurodivergent traits.⁸

In fact, research suggests at least 30-40% of neurodivergent adults are unemployed, and many more are underemployed.⁹ Many, if not most, neurodivergent professionals who make it into full-time employment expend immense energy masking (see glossary on page 6) due to well-founded fear of social stigma and career consequences.¹⁰ With so much energy wasted on conforming to narrow ways of working, few can make it to the upper echelons of leadership. Those who do tell us about tremendous personal sacrifice; those who don't tell us about languishing under unspoken rules, indecipherable politics, and rigid expectations.

Smart leaders will see this for what it is: a serious problem that needs a strategic, systemic solution.

Keep high performers in the game

This research, and the many stories that bring it to life, suggest that when it comes to neurodivergent talent:

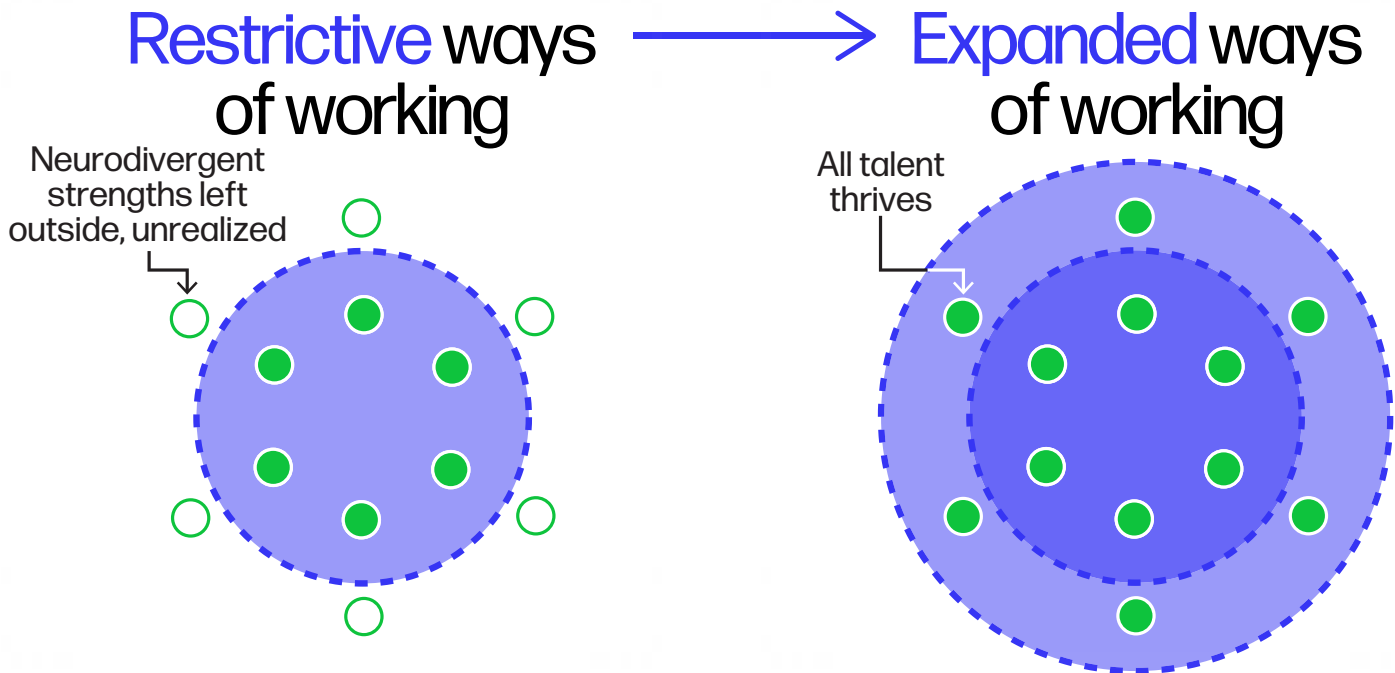
- Many outperform peers, but are misperceived or overlooked.
- Attrition, especially among high performers, is a serious risk.
- AI adoption seems to be faster and more intuitive for neurodivergent professionals.
- Activating neurodivergent talent creates a strategic business advantage.

Recent research reveals unique abilities associated with different forms of neurodivergence, but most research continues to take a deficit-based approach to fixing undesirable traits, rather than investigating the conditions under which neurodivergent individuals can thrive.¹¹

Our research takes a different approach: being neurodivergent ourselves, we offer leaders rare, insider access to the perspectives of neurodivergent professionals, using their stories to illustrate unique strengths and the workplace conditions that enable them. While most of the strengths we describe in this report do not on their own seem exclusive to neurodivergent minds, the ways they co-occur, interplay, and show up in extremes for this population—and the failure of most business environments to capitalize on them—suggest an exciting, novel opportunity unique to embracing neurodiversity.

Neurodivergent professionals bring this deep well of unrealized potential at a time when fresh approaches in the face of unprecedented technological disruption and economic uncertainty are needed most. This forms the impetus for our exploration of neuroinclusion as a way of working that enables all team members, both neurodivergent and neurotypical, to contribute and co-create at their full potential.

We find neurodivergent professionals, far from lacking in capability, are too often locked out of full participation by invisible barriers, unspoken norms, and unquestioned expectations that undergird restrictive ways of working.



But when workplaces default to flexibility, measure what matters, presume capability, design for edge cases, and build adaptive systems, they expand norms to bypass those blocks. **Neuroinclusion means making workplaces adaptive enough to embrace whatever talent walks in the door, and expanding ways of working so that all team members can contribute and co-create at their full potential.**

We see tremendous business opportunity for organizations that pursue neuroinclusion. In the body of this report, we reveal and explore six strategic advantages won through neuroinclusion:

- 1 **Neutralized risks and inefficiencies**
- 2 **Undiscovered synergies**
- 3 **Output beyond expectation**
- 4 **Seamless project execution**
- 5 **Kindness that outperforms niceness**
- 6 **Next-level processing power**

For each of these strategic advantages, we examine the underlying neurodivergent strengths; the stubborn misperceptions that obscure those strengths; and finally, the workplace shifts that expand ways of working and enable these strengths.

In the final section, we aggregate these workplace shifts and more in the **Neuroinclusion Operating System**: a set of playbooks for HR practitioners, leaders, and teammates to expand rigid ways of working, to the benefit of all.

“If there were more space for different ways of thinking and showing up, less emphasis on appearances, more curiosity and flexibility—I think I’d be able to deliver even more impact without burning myself out.”

– **Neurodivergent professional**

The cost of being locked out

When strengths go unrealized, it’s a signal the system is failing.

UNSEEN

83%

of our sample say aspects of their work style are repeatedly misperceived or misunderstood by neurotypical colleagues.

UNMOORED

82%

of our sample say there are aspects of workplace culture or unspoken expectations which make no sense to them.

UNTAPPED

89%

of our sample say they possess unique strengths or abilities that they rarely see displayed by others.

Why we're focused on strengths

Our report draws on the social model of disability to advocate for a shift toward neuroinclusion. This model distinguishes between impairment—an inherent condition—and disability, which arises when society fails to accommodate differences and instead enforces ways of working and living that marginalize those who cannot comply.¹² We consider this lens more powerful than deficit-based lenses, which overlook the strengths neurodivergent professionals can possess and presume neurotypicality as both default and ideal. Instead, we embrace a strengths-based approach informed by the social model that not only connects neuroinclusion with opportunity rather than limitation but also recognizes the benefits to neurotypical professionals of expanding ways of working. **This reframing encourages workplaces to design environments and processes that tap into everyone's strengths rather than accommodate perceived deficits.**

We are also wary of perpetuating “savant” stereotypes with our framework or endorsing the notion that all neurodivergent people possess lucrative “superpowers.” While some do frame their neurodivergence proudly as a superpower, others insist theirs is no more than a debilitating condition, and still more see their unique abilities and disabilities as two sides of the same coin. One's relationship to their neurodivergence is as unique as the individual themselves, and while we seek to honor experiences of disability, we are also bold in our exploration of the untapped abilities that came up in our research. Our intention is to emphasize that neurodivergent professionals, like all professionals, possess a range of strengths and weaknesses; the goal of a strengths-based, social-model approach is to expand the frame so that neurodivergent talent on the margins can finally shine, in workplaces that are better—and more productive—for everyone.

1

STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE

Neutralized risks and inefficiencies

Imagine...

Avoiding a failed pilot by proactively identifying and addressing the types of pitfalls that were previously invisible to your team

Discovering and addressing inefficiencies before resources go to waste

Diagnosing the causes of team dysfunction before talent heads for the door

Elsa's story illustrates how working relationships suffer when an eye for risks and inefficiencies is treated as threatening rather than as a laser-focused commitment to business success:

Vision misread as threat: Even as she excels and advances quickly, Elsa always seems to be rubbing someone the wrong way. At work, she's laser-focused on the problem in front of her, unattached to the status quo as she pursues the "clearest, most compelling path to a solution." When it comes to the people stewarding that status quo, "I often step on toes," she admits, "or inadvertently send threatening signals." She finds it frustrating that her commitment to delivering what's best for the business is so often interpreted as a personal attack on others.

Elsa feels she's misunderstood more often than others because she's "thinking a few steps further and deeper" than the people around her. Questions that come from that deeper thinking are often misinterpreted as undermining or naysaying, and actions taken to avoid distant pitfalls look like power grabs. Her recognition of patterns in business processes extends to interpersonal behavior and relationships, too, where she becomes painfully aware of toxic dynamics that seem invisible to others—and her attempts to repair this invisible fabric of trust often go ignored.

Elsa finds that this organizational fabric of trust is the biggest factor in whether or not she can thrive and collaborate in a workplace. Issues in that fabric "affect those outside the norm most," says Elsa, "but they also affect the whole." She adds, "Understanding this benefits everyone, not just people on the fringes."

Many neurodivergent professionals excel at skills that reduce costs and strengthen culture: **systems thinking, pattern recognition, and healthy conflict.**

Yet most teams today are set up to shut these strengths down, labeling those who display them as insubordinate, disruptive, and inflexible.

Neuroinclusive teams value these contributions and welcome them by normalizing constructive challenge and prioritizing psychological safety.

THE STRENGTHS UNLOCKED

Systems thinking, pattern recognition, healthy conflict

Systems thinking is an approach to problem-solving that views problems or situations as interconnected systems rather than isolated parts.¹³ Such thinkers consider problems and processes from a holistic perspective rather than engage with each aspect of a system in a silo. For an adept systems thinker, proposed ideas will immediately bring to mind a detailed picture of all components, including incongruencies and potential cross-functional impacts.

“I have a keen sense of the thing that we’re making and what it will look like when it’s done. And being able to see that end product yields a lot of the questions that I will ask up front. In my head, I already see everything that needs to be done and has to happen to get there.”

– Neurodivergent professional

Pattern recognition refers to the ability to identify regularities and structures within data, which enables the prediction of outcomes and the ability to make informed decisions.¹⁴ Professionals with strong pattern recognition skills draw connections across functions, projects, and time that may be invisible to others, enabling product innovation, diagnosis of entrenched organizational problems, streamlined solutions, and more. As one interviewee explains, “I’ll join a project and easily find something that three people overlooked before me because they did not see the connection. For me, it’s clear as day.”

Healthy conflict prioritizes open communication where parties actively consider different ideas and contributions; this differs from unhealthy conflict, which is either focused on “winning” at the expense of others or avoiding conflict altogether.¹⁵ Professionals who excel in healthy conflict aren’t afraid of disagreement and prefer open and honest dialogue to reach a shared understanding over well-intentioned attempts to preserve the peace. Discussing her experience as an executive and her observations of fellow neurodivergent professionals, one interviewee reflects, “We don’t care about conflict. I even enjoy the friction, because it helps spark ideas.”

THE MISPERCEPTION

The insubordinate naysayer

When neurodivergent professionals demonstrate these strengths by asking lots of questions and pointing out weak ideas and processes, we hear they are often misperceived by peers as disruptive, pessimistic, negative, or mean-spirited. When they voice concerns in a blunt tone or in front of a large group, others may assume they are deliberately trying to undermine or embarrass peers and authority figures. Ultimately, the tone, tactics, and supposed intent of the “naysayer” get more attention than any questions they’re asking or issues they’re raising.

Foresight misread as resistance: Alice is always being praised for going above and beyond, but in her latest performance review, she was surprised to find herself labeled “inflexible.”

The reason? Whenever a change is announced, she asks about every downstream impact, noticing ways it might affect related processes, dependent teams, or the customer experience. To her, this isn't resistance; it's simply connecting the dots and seeing the chain reaction before it starts.

Her questions are treated as roadblocks rather than insights. “Just pilot it and see what happens,” she's told. “But when you have strong pattern recognition skills,” Alice says, “You know what's going to happen.” And in light of that insight, pushing for preventative measures isn't a matter of inflexibility; to Alice, “it actually just seems like common sense.”

“As I was calling out more and more problems, they were getting directed back at me, as if I was the problem,” another neurodivergent professional reflects. This experience came up repeatedly in our interviews and focus groups: when you're the only person speaking up about issues that others lack the pattern recognition to see, *you* and your seemingly endless complaints are seen as the only real problem the team is facing.

Some employees silence themselves. One interviewee, whose work environment is highly conflict-averse, withholds his contributions rather than risk offending others. The hard part of meetings, he explains, is “not taking action, not bringing something up, because you don't know of a polite or acceptable way to put it which wouldn't cause the whole audience to go silent and stare at you.”

Ironically, when this dynamic leads to exasperation or lackluster participation from neurodivergent professionals, it reinforces “bad attitude” narratives that only worsen the divide between them and their colleagues.

“Questions are not conflict. Questions are not challenges,” elaborates Dr. Victoria Verlezza, a neurodivergent coach and consultant. “Because people in general are passive-aggressive in workplaces, the assumption is that our questions, too, must be passive-aggressive. They think there’s a hidden meaning in everything, which is why we’re told, ‘You’re being confrontational’ just for asking simple questions.”

A high tolerance for conflict is a double-edged sword that can further exacerbate this dynamic. Several neurodivergent professionals report raising questions regardless of hierarchy, often unaware of the friction this creates with neurotypical colleagues, who may then see them as pessimistic, rude, or stubborn rather than as potential sources of insight. Such misreadings are reinforced by workplace cultures that view conflict or criticism as inherently negative and costly.¹⁶ “I can think fast on my feet, verbalize things well, but unfortunately, it can come across like I’m arguing,” shares one neurodivergent professional. “I just want to get to some kind of common ground and move forward.”

THE SHIFT

Normalize constructive challenge and build psychological safety

We propose that neuroinclusive teams treat conflict differently. Instead of avoiding dissent, they build psychological safety and create the conditions for healthy, constructive challenge. Indeed, research suggests that in cooperative environments, dissent and criticism do not impede innovation—they foster more and better ideas.¹⁷

Constructive challenge refers to the respectful and intentional questioning or testing of ideas and decisions. The purpose is not to undermine, but to strengthen reasoning, accountability, and outcomes.¹⁸ Constructive challenges may be probing and critical, but they are not equivalent to unhelpful or adversarial criticism. Teams that invite constructive challenge within cooperative environments can reduce groupthink and improve organizational decision-making and ideation.

This concept is linked to **psychological safety**, as coined by Harvard Business School Professor Amy C. Edmondson: the shared belief within a team or organization that its members can learn, contribute, and challenge the status quo without fear of punishment or embarrassment.¹⁹ Psychological safety is not synonymous with comfort; such teams may even experience more conflict since teammates are encouraged to engage with each other even when they disagree. This increase in productive disagreement should not be mistaken for a blank check to say anything—psychological safety comes with boundaries and does not permit harmful speech or personal attacks.²⁰

Creating space for psychological safety requires making room for the many ways people communicate. “Assuming that everyone processes information in the same way can lead to misunderstandings,” Racheal Pallares, CEO of the Neurodiversity Training Institute, reminds us. “Neurotypical individuals often unknowingly create barriers when communicating with their neurodiverse colleagues. Understanding these barriers is the first step in breaking them down.”

When constructive challenge is normalized, unique observations and opportunities visible to only a few become accessible to all. Rollouts and launches become more seamless, with more contingencies planned for. When it's safe for anyone to learn in real time with the team—to ask questions, to say, “I don't know,” to interrogate the reasoning behind decisions and processes—knowledge gaps and inefficiencies become apparent quickly, and resources can be better allocated. Diagnosing dysfunction becomes a simple process, led by those with the capacity for healthy conflict. Teams build trust instead of breaking it, and top talent feels at home.

For more on how to achieve this shift, refer to page 55.

The cost of a voice

Colleagues today describe Claire as strategic, compassionate, and unflinchingly honest. She rose to senior ranks and led global teams through major transformations, including a 50% workforce layoff, where her candor and empathy stood out against peers. “I grew a career against the odds,” she says, “considering I’m autistic.”

From the beginning, speaking itself was a battle. “I have a pain response to the sound of my own voice,” she explains. By age 3, she had not said a word—until she overheard her parents discuss institutionalizing her. She realized that her voice, however painful, was her only path to acceptance. Still, sounds remained so overwhelming that she repeatedly threw herself into bodies of water to experience quiet. “My parents had to keep performing CPR,” she recalls.

Despite these difficulties, Claire made her peace with speaking, finished school, and entered the workforce. “I choose to harm myself every single time I talk. But to self-advocate, to have my voice heard, is more important to me than whatever harm I choose to do to myself,” she says.

Early in her career, Claire was fired repeatedly, labeled “difficult,” “disruptive,” and “aggressive.” She came to understand the real issue was others’ projection of meaning onto her straightforward affect. “In the lack of a signal, people map one,” she explains. Insecure colleagues saw her as hostile; anxious ones saw her as cold. Searching for answers, she pursued therapy, was eventually diagnosed with autism, and took extreme measures to compensate. In combination with acting classes, “I subjected myself to ABA [applied behavior analysis] therapy,” she says, referencing the controversial treatment, which is intended to help autistic individuals perform socially desirable behaviors and reduce undesirable ones. “When other people go to work, they are their ‘authentic self.’ When I go to work, I have to make sure I’m expressing the ‘right’ emotions on my face, and emulate what people think of as ‘natural speech.’”

Claire's cognitive profile is unusual: a top 5% IQ score in matrix reasoning paired with auditory processing challenges that drop her effective functioning by nearly 20 percentile points when information is spoken rather than written. "When I had coworkers run by my desk and verbally give last-minute instructions, I had to guess [what they'd said]. Having these audio processing delays is like being deaf." Closed captions on Zoom and AI meeting notes have been life-changing.

Claire's heavy masking has paid off, and as a senior leader, her directness has become an asset. When her company faced mass layoffs at one location, she was proactive and transparent with her team, negotiating promotions, relocations, or severance depending on each person's needs. One of her peers, by contrast, locked his office door. "I'm a quiet leader," Claire says. "I see something is happening, I quietly talk to my people, I try to fix things. I solve problems in a way that benefits the company *and* the employee—before it blows up." Her skills have earned her recognition as one of the top 10 women shaping her field.

Success is bittersweet for Claire. She recalls the repeated firings and wonders how many people like her never made it. "Leaders like me are rare," she says. "There are reasons in the system why we do not rise."

Claire's story makes clear that the question is not whether autistic professionals can succeed, but how much talent we lose when workplaces fail to embrace them.



STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE

Undiscovered synergies

Imagine...

Elegant, outside-the-box solutions and cross-functional opportunities

Integrated teams that move seamlessly across functions to support one another

Streamlined processes that eliminate duplicate work

Brilliant synergies and undiscovered opportunities require creative minds to bring them to life, but creativity needs room to breathe. Alex's story illustrates how organizations may see the upside to profitable strengths, but fail to create the conditions to enable those strengths long-term:

Creativity crushed by busy-ness: Alex is known for her creative problem-solving. "I'm the person who comes up with solutions to these very complicated client problems," she explains, referring to the thorny, multifunctional, many-faceted challenges that are the bread and butter of elite consulting firms like hers. She loves the novelty of diving into brand new challenges that require bespoke solutions, and finds delighting clients with those solutions to be meaningful and gratifying. However, the expectations of her work environment—like most—limit Alex's capabilities rather than enable them. "Everyone loves my ideas and the client solutions I present," she says, "but I can't go into deep-thinking mode if I'm toggling between meetings and chats all day."

Alex needs mental space and quiet to do her creative cross-functional problem-solving. But every day, she's booked solid with meetings, fielding constant chats and emails in between—activities that are largely a poor use of her time and talent, but expected of everyone regardless. Alex's best ideas don't surface until she's off the clock at night, and she can't resist fleshing them out after hours. But by working during her personal time instead of truly unplugging and recharging, she knows she's on the road to burnout. "It would be nice if it was acceptable to take four hours and basically meditate, let the ideas come to me," she says. "But if an exec saw me doing that, and I said, 'That's me working,' they wouldn't believe it."

Creative neurodivergent professionals with **novelty seeking** and **altruistic** tendencies can solve complex problems, facilitate connections across teams and workstreams, and lend a hand to others without hesitation, regardless of whether or not they'll receive credit.

In non-neuroinclusive workplaces, the behaviors associated with these strengths can register as suspicious, meddling, or controlling.

Neuroinclusive leaders leverage a strengths-based management style that promotes collaboration and takes full advantage of every team member's abilities, rather than focusing on correcting deficits or enforcing one-size-fits-all expectations.

THE STRENGTHS UNLOCKED

Creativity, novelty seeking, altruism

Creativity refers to the ability to form novel and valuable ideas or works using one's imagination. In organizational contexts, creativity facilitates growth and innovation,²¹ and it often involves a dynamic interplay between two types of thinking: divergent thinking, which spirals away from a central question to explore new ideas and possibilities, and convergent thinking, which homes in on a solution that incorporates all relevant facts and inputs.²² Emerging research suggests some neurodivergent individuals may excel at divergent thinking and creativity in general.²³ As one interviewee describes, "I love change, I love chaos. I'm really good at sifting through chaos and finding the path forward."

Novelty seeking is a personality trait characterized by a preference for new, complex, and stimulating experiences. It is linked to the brain's reward system, which helps drive motivation, curiosity, and the desire to explore.²⁴ Individuals who are novelty seeking often thrive in dynamic environments and may test boundaries when given tedious responsibilities. They often have a natural inclination toward divergent thinking and out-of-the-box ideation.²⁵ When properly deployed, novelty seeking professionals can be powerhouses. "When I worked for a company where the CEO was an engineer, I went from manager to global head of marketing in three-and-a-

half years,” recounts one interviewee. “He appreciated my way of thinking, whereas in corporate cultures that are very ego-driven, I’ve run into a lot of issues.”

Altruism is the tendency for an individual to perform selfless acts that benefit others even at the risk of their own well-being.²⁶ Many altruistic individuals are motivated to sacrifice personal gain to ensure fair outcomes for others, even when they are not directly affected by the issue at hand. At work, they may be courageous advocates who can confront management decisions or help solve systemic issues out of a principled desire to maximize fairness.²⁷ This altruism can extend to more extreme sacrifice as well; for instance, one interviewee sacrificed part of their bonus to ensure a direct report kept their job.

“If I can do something in twenty minutes that would take someone else four hours, why shouldn’t I? Unless they need the learning opportunity, I can’t stand not to step in and lighten someone else’s load when I have the skills and capacity to do so.”

- Neurodivergent professional

THE MISPERCEPTION

The pedantic busybody rocking the boat

Although these traits offer clear benefits to workplaces, interviews with neurodivergent professionals reveal that they’re rarely embraced in practice. While Alex, in our opening story, has a role that leverages her altruism and novelty seeking into cross-functional problem-solving, for others these traits often result in reprimand for disregarding established processes or overstepping workplace boundaries. Meanwhile, creativity is taken for granted (at best) or seen as threatening (at worst).

Novelty seeking neurodivergent professionals often carry an earnest curiosity about all components of a process or project. As persistent seekers of new and interesting experiences, many ask questions of, or make recommendations to, peers in other functions. Combined with altruistic tendencies, they may not hesitate to point out unfairness on other teams if they see it and might even step over chains of command to confront leaders directly.

Help that hurts: Jordan often asks other teams about their work and processes, offering support and insights where she feels she can help. If something is in her wheelhouse, she won't hesitate to jump in and handle it. To her, this is not overstepping; it is simply helping.

While some colleagues may welcome the support, others bristle. "It's caused me a lot of friction," Jordan says. She ends up owning work that isn't hers, making enemies without realizing it, and she is sometimes blindsided by obstruction from those she has unwittingly rubbed the wrong way. "I just don't intuit or see the social norms," she explains, "especially the role-based territorial lines that are drawn."

Another interviewee shares a similar pattern of experience: "When I try to be helpful, give resources to peers, people seem to think I'm being a control freak or telling them what to do." Others, who may have found their strengths welcomed in smaller organizations, notice barriers in larger organizations that stymie their forward momentum. "In most orgs, if you're a maverick thinker, they feel threatened by you. They will say, 'You culturally do not fit, you challenge the status quo too much,'" shares one autistic professional.

These common experiences reflect an often-unspoken "stay in your lane" expectation at work, which encourages employees to focus on what they know and not question or consider the decisions or processes outside of their formal roles.²⁸ This mindset all but ensures that the cross-functional insight and support potential of neurodivergent professionals will be misread as creating needless friction and interference.

THE SHIFT

Take a strengths-based approach

Managers and leaders can bring out the best in their teams and better leverage cross-functional opportunities by taking a strengths-based approach to management and talent development. This means shifting the focus from fixing weaknesses to amplifying what team members do best. Instead of trying to shape each person toward an identical performance profile, a strengths-based approach enables special skills to be maximally applied, while compensating for weaker areas with others' strengths and complementary hiring. This dynamic approach frees up high-potential talent to do what they do best instead of expending valuable time and energy on low-impact efforts or areas of weakness in which they will never excel.

"Managers can only lead if they dare to think nonlinearly," says Perry Knoppert, founder of The Octopus Movement. "Nonlinear leaders embrace the unknown, use vulnerability as a strength, and explore new ways of leading. They don't presume competence as a minimum; they presume brilliance as a starting point."

When team members are managed according to their strengths, everyone receives the recognition and opportunities commensurate with their abilities and can step in to compensate for one another's shortcomings. Natural problem-solvers, process creators, and PowerPoint-builders can intervene where and when they're needed without worrying about becoming overburdened. Those who are naturally curious and cross-functional in their approach have opportunities to streamline processes and activate synergies. Creative thinkers have the space to create something from nothing, delivering big, high-potential ideas in the time they used to spend bogged down in repetitive tasks or endless meetings.

Learn more about the practical steps to taking a strengths-based approach on page 70.

Common neurodivergent traits and challenges

Many neurodivergent professionals face challenges that are dismissed in ways that other, more visible disability-related issues are not. Neurotypical managers, colleagues, and HR professionals must understand that their own experiences of sensory discomfort and distractibility are not approximations for what neurodivergent colleagues go through; the following traits, and the challenges that accompany them, are distinct to the neurodivergent population. In a truly neuroinclusive environment, these traits are easy to manage with built-in flexibility and shouldn't require convincing managers, colleagues, or HR of their validity.

Sensory issues: Many neurodivergent people experience heightened or reduced sensitivity to light, sound, touch, or smell.²⁹ For example, a buzzing fluorescent bulb, overlapping conversations, or the texture of certain clothing may be intolerably distracting or even painful. In workplaces, this can affect productivity and well-being if not accommodated. Noise-canceling headphones and other gear, flexible dress codes, and quiet workspaces are often all it takes to address these kinds of sensitivities.

Executive function challenges: Executive functions (e.g., planning, prioritization,

task initiation, and working memory) can be harder for some neurodivergent professionals.³⁰ What may look like “laziness” or “disorganization” is often the result of real neurocognitive differences rather than a lack of effort or care. For example, starting a task without a clear first step can feel paralyzing. Simple supports—structured deadlines, visual task boards, or breaking tasks down—can improve performance.

Rejection sensitive dysphoria (RSD):

RSD refers to an intense emotional reaction to perceived criticism, rejection, or failure. Even small amounts of negative feedback can trigger a disproportionate spiral of shame, sadness, or anger.³¹ This is not “overreacting,” but a neurocognitive pattern that can be triggered by something as seemingly innocuous as a casual “I need to talk to you later” message from a manager. Ongoing positive and reinforcing feedback, clear expectations, transparent communication, and the opportunity to review critical feedback in writing in advance can help mitigate the effects of RSD.

Strong fairness and justice orientation:

Many neurodivergent individuals have a heightened sense of fairness and justice, and feel deep distress when they see

rules applied inconsistently or inequities go unaddressed.³² This can lead them to challenge authority, raise difficult questions, or call out double standards that others let slide. Managers and colleagues should recognize that these seemingly disruptive behaviors are often underpinned by this drive for fairness rather than any malicious intent.

Pathological demand avoidance (PDA):

Often described in autistic individuals, PDA (which some have informally renamed “persistent demand for autonomy”) involves an anxiety-driven need to resist or avoid ordinary demands and expectations.³³ It is not simple defiance but a neurological response to perceived loss of autonomy. In a workplace, a person with PDA may resist rigid expectations or direct orders, yet thrive when tasks are framed collaboratively or with choice and flexibility.

Difficulty lying: Some neurodivergent people describe being unable to lie or bend the truth, even when social convention seems to require it.³⁴ While this can be refreshing, it may also create friction in workplaces that value “softening the truth” and managing optics. For example, a neurodivergent employee might bluntly say a project is failing rather than framing it more diplomatically. Recognizing this tendency

can help managers interpret candor as sincerity rather than rudeness.

Flow states and hyperfocus: While we’ve discussed hyperfocus—the ability to sustain deep concentration for long periods on a task of interest—as a strength, it’s important to understand the challenges that accompany it. These flow states, can lead to losing track of time, skipping meals, missing meetings, or struggling to shift attention to new tasks.³⁵ Often, with the support of check-ins and reminders from team members and managers, neurodivergent professionals can manage these downsides to hyperfocus.

Literal or concrete communication:

Many autistic individuals in particular process language literally, which can lead to misunderstandings about idioms and vague instructions or feedback.³⁶ “ASAP” may register as “don’t work on anything else, don’t eat, don’t sleep until this is complete.” Clear, specific communication and deadlines help align expectations.

3

STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE

Output beyond expectation

Imagine...

Permanently boosting long-term productivity by enabling high-output individuals

Reducing turnover of your most productive team members

Scaling up showstopping output precisely when critical projects demand it

Highly productive individuals tend to be welcome in any workplace, but inconsistency is rarely tolerated. Thomas's story illustrates how workplace expectations that ignore ebbs and flows of energy can drive away top talent:

Output without support: *Thomas has been innovating for his teams since the beginning: in his very first entry-level role, he immediately noticed an opportunity to free up resources by reworking an antiquated system. Luckily, his manager gave him the go-ahead to implement his vision, and he revamped the program from top to bottom. A workstream that had for years required the full-time effort of four people only needed one-and-a-half after Thomas' transformation—which he completed in only 30 days. Time and again, Thomas has relied on his capacity to lock in on a project and rapidly produce results. "I see it as a kind of superpower," Thomas says. "When my hyperfocus is applied in the right direction, I can do the work of two to three people."*

Thomas can't fire on all cylinders indefinitely, though; he needs time to recharge and recover. "In the moment, you are just so hyperfocused and on a mission," he says, "but it's not sustainable to do it long term. Anything long-term is just going to burn you out." Fortunately, Thomas is in project-based work, so he can manage these expectations to some extent by seeking projects that align with intermittent bursts of extreme productivity. But that isn't always possible, and when the bar is set high and expectations start piling up, Thomas doesn't know where he can turn for support.

Neurodivergent professionals who excel at **hyperfocus**, **high productivity**, and **performance under pressure** represent an incredible value add for high-volume teams tackling urgent challenges and deliverables.

But neurodivergent professionals we interviewed made clear it's rare to see these abilities properly enabled. More often, they're seen as distracted, taken for granted, or met with a bar for performance that rises until it's impossible to clear.

Neuroinclusive teams lean on direct measurements of engagement and output rather than superficial performances of participation that aren't tied to productivity, and they provide flexibility around how work gets done by accommodating fluctuations in energy and capacity.

THE STRENGTHS UNLOCKED

Hyperfocus, productivity, performance under pressure

Hyperfocus describes a state of deep mental immersion in a task to the point where everything else fades into the background.³⁷ Hyperfocus does not have a consistent clinical definition but is typically characterized as an intense state of concentration that can boost productivity while also making it difficult to shift focus when necessary. Both neurotypical and neurodivergent professionals can experience hyperfocus, but it is most often discussed in the context of ADHD and autism. Professionals who often experience hyperfocus can be powerful assets to a team and deliver high-quality work at a rapid pace, but they may require balancing support strategies to avoid burnout.³⁸ As one interviewee without these supports explains, "I could always jump in and save the day. All the problem projects were given to me. Normally with projects, you have peaks and valleys—but I was going peak to peak to peak until I had a nervous breakdown."

Productivity is a measure of efficiency in converting inputs to outputs. In the context of workplaces, it represents the value each team member brings to the success of the overall business.³⁹ While productivity is typically thought

of as steady output day after day, for some neurodivergent individuals, it may be less consistent but exceptionally above-average. When supported with flexibility, this difference in capacity can be leveraged during business-critical periods, turning variability into competitive advantage.⁴⁰

“I work a lot faster than my peers—sometimes it’s made me feel like I’m not doing enough, like I have to overwork myself to fill that whole eight hours.”

– Neurodivergent professional

Performance under pressure describes the drive that kicks in when deadlines loom, priorities shift, or stakes rise. In these situations, some individuals thrive, maintaining and sometimes even leveling up their capacity for focus and productivity.⁴¹ Some neurodivergent individuals may harness pressure in ways that defy conventional assumptions about stress. “I work better under pressure,” shares one focus group participant. “So, even though I know I have a deadline and time opens up for me to work towards it, I can’t seem to really get in gear until it’s crunch time.” These professionals may be particularly valuable to employers when business needs and developments are unpredictable.

THE MISPERCEPTION

Unengaged, unresponsive, unseen

Thomas, whose story opened this section, is one of many neurodivergent professionals we spoke to who have missed messages and meetings or taken too long to answer emails due to hyperfocus. Though these professionals are committed—perhaps more than most—to the work in front of them, in today’s meeting- and message-heavy environments, these missteps can easily read as disengagement.

Hyperfocus suffocated: *Paul, an AuDHD professional, ended up losing his job because he didn't respond to every email within eight minutes: "I'd get hyperfocused on programming, but I wasn't responding to emails fast enough for them. It started as, 'We need you to respond to emails within forty-five minutes,' then over the course of seven years, it became thirty, then twenty, fifteen—until at the very end, I was expected to respond to every email within eight minutes." His colleagues did not face the same expectations; Paul saw they could take an hour to respond to an email without reprimand. But those colleagues were perceived to be engaged and on top of things, whereas Paul, despite the fact that he was working every other weekend, was treated like he was distracted and unengaged—and tightly monitored as a result.*

Perceptions of disengagement are compounded by neurotypical expectations for social performance in meetings. "I've learned to perform the right facial expressions for the most part, but I'm often perceived to feel a way I don't feel, or have a perception I don't have," explains one autistic interviewee. "For instance, when I'm truly surprised by information, I fail to manufacture a surprised face, and then, ironically, I'm perceived to not be surprised at all." When these professionals try to explain their unusual or absent facial expressions, they often dig an even deeper hole, appearing to backpedal out of a lie or deflect from a damaging "truth" they never actually revealed. "These types of misunderstandings, when they happen at important moments, can be a big problem," admits our autistic interviewee.

Neurodivergent professionals also tend to follow nontraditional workflows, such as alternating between periods of hyperproductivity and rest rather than maintaining an even pace day after day. In meetings, they may keep their hands busy or their cameras off—strategies that improve focus but can be misread by neurotypical colleagues as signs of disengagement. "Having a camera on doesn't mean someone's engaged or not," neurodivergent coach and consultant Dr. Victoria Verlezza reminds us. "If their camera is off, you have no idea what's going on; if it's on, you also don't know that they're paying attention."

Too often, colleagues and managers assume engagement looks like being glued to a desk, looking attentive, making eye contact, keeping cameras on, or speaking often in meetings, when in reality these behaviors on their own say little about how invested or productive someone truly is. One interviewee points out that *because* he struggles to engage with his peers, he overcompensates with productivity: “My most unique strength is I work harder—I’m always looking for something to do, stay on the move, stay productive, because I can’t socialize. They call me ‘the shark’ because of that.”

THE SHIFT

Measure engagement directly and offer flexibility

Managers can solve this perception disconnect by focusing on employees’ contributions above superficial signals of engagement. Did the person who spoke a lot in the meeting contribute anything of value? What about the person with their camera off who had to be called upon? The value of contributions, not the means of attaining them, should hold the greatest weight when engagement and performance are being assessed. As Perry Knoppert, founder of [The Octopus Movement](#), says: “Real engagement happens when leaders let go of control, embrace chaos, and trust the human mind to deliver.”

Neuroinclusive workplaces are also flexible with how work gets done. Rather than approving flexible options via one-off accommodation requests, HR can set clear parameters for managerial discretion. Flexibility goes beyond remote work options: core meeting hours, varied commute times, focus time blocks, no-meeting days, and asynchronous contributions are just a starting point for how managers can flex to improve productivity, engagement, and neuroinclusion.

Baking in the expectation that the “how” of work can flex in service of the “what” makes it easier for everyone to improve and adjust their workflows

without much fanfare. This is especially important for neurodivergent professionals who are hesitant to disclose their conditions. “Because disclosing comes with so many risks, many neurodivergent professionals come up with creative solutions and sell them to managers without disclosing,” explains neurodivergent accommodations expert Kris Aakvik. “That’s even more work and effort, yet most people with invisible disabilities do that instead of going through the reasonable accommodations process, and eventually they leave. And then everyone asks, ‘Why did that excellent performer leave the company?’”

When engagement and contributions are measured directly, talent that previously went unnoticed becomes visible—as do unproductive team members who were previously hiding behind superficial performance in meetings. Highly productive team members can focus their energy on their work product instead of superficial performances of engagement, and with flexible approaches like core hours, they are free to hyperfocus without fear of appearing unresponsive. Flexible management also ensures that those who can step up and triple their output during crunch time have the recovery periods necessary for those contributions to be sustainable. High-output team members can stay with the organization, their contributions properly recognized, with strategies at hand to avoid burnout.

For more on how to achieve this shift, refer to page 55.

Ahead of the curve on AI

For many neurodivergent professionals, artificial intelligence (AI) feels less like a foreign tool to master and more like a natural extension of how they think. As one puts it, “When I first interacted with a large language model, I had the feeling of intuitively understanding how it works—because it works the way my mind does.”

That intuitive grasp translates to rapid adoption. Neurodivergent employees are experimenting with AI across all corners of their work: automating data analysis, improving communications, learning new skills, generating code, and more. One describes using Microsoft Copilot to rewrite their emails with a friendlier tone; another uses the tool to learn Excel and Power Query coding.

Neurodivergent professionals are also tapping into closed captions, transcripts, and AI meeting summaries to turn overwhelming streams of spoken information into structured, usable knowledge. As one explains, “Now, I have AI give me summaries and bullet points, and I religiously link between all these notes.” For another, transcripts have become more than just a record: “I’ve been putting meeting transcripts into Gemini and asking for feedback on how I was in that meeting.”

One neurodivergent professional compares learning AI to the trial-and-error approach that has defined her career: “I’m kind of ahead of the curve, because I’m used to trying and trying,” she says. “You have to fail and fail, that’s how you learn AI—and that’s what I’ve had to do my whole career. That’s a strength; creativity is a strength.”

New data confirms what these stories suggest: neurodivergent professionals are leading the way in AI adoption. According to data from EY’s 2025 study, *Global Neuroinclusion at Work*, neurodivergent professionals are 36% more likely than their neurotypical counterparts to report specialist or expert proficiency in AI and machine learning.⁴²

For organizations, this signals an untapped opportunity: the very employees often overlooked by traditional workplaces may be the ones best prepared to guide them into the future.

4

STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE

Seamless project execution

Imagine...

Every detail accounted for

Mastery, not just proficiency

Quality elevated to excellence

Workplaces that prioritize speed for its own sake might never have the opportunity to elevate the quality of their output. Miranda's story illustrates how a slow uptake can yield stronger, not weaker, results:

Slow start, strong finish: *Miranda needs to think about the details. She can't see the big picture without first piecing together all the small pictures that ladder up to it. She needs to create a story in her mind in order to understand a process or a problem. "I learn visually; I need diagrams and color-coding," she elaborates. "I can't just see a lot of acronyms on a slide and actually grasp the meaning."*

She admits that these processing needs lead to "a slower start" compared to her colleagues. But in the long term, what she produces is more thorough and higher quality than what she sees from her peers. Despite this, she worries about how she is perceived, and if others overlook the quality of her work because she doesn't pick things up as easily as they do. "I feel defensive of my technique," she says. "It works, just not as fast as yours."

Neurodivergent professionals with strong **bottom-up processing** skills and **detail orientation** can be the hidden advantage that helps teams deliver masterful, high-quality outputs.

But details take time, and without colleagues' understanding of the unusual mental processes behind this meticulous approach and the clear business value it brings, we find these professionals are more often sidelined than they are recognized for how they round out a team's skill set.

Because they think so differently from their peers, neurodivergent professionals with these strengths benefit more than most from knowing the “why” behind the work. Neuroinclusive workplaces build in the “why” and bring in advocates to bridge perception gaps.

THE STRENGTHS UNLOCKED

Bottom-up processing, detail orientation

Bottom-up processing is a data-driven processing style where comprehension begins with collecting external information and analyzing it as part of a broader picture without relying on existing mental models or expectations. It represents an inductive approach rather than the deductive approach of top-down thinking, where existing expectations create perceptions about new data.⁴³ For example, instead of interpreting a task based on past assumptions or experiences (top-down), a bottom-up thinker dissects each detail before forming an interpretation. Organizations that embrace bottom-up processors in addition to top-down thinkers may capture a fuller range of creativity and innovation from their teams.

“I look at the bigger picture, analyze patterns, think through long-term implications, and try to anticipate what might go wrong before it does. I like to be thorough, thoughtful, and strategic. But I’ve found that a lot of workplace cultures prioritize speed, surface-level fixes, or sticking rigidly to ‘how it’s always been done.’”

– Neurodivergent professional

Detail orientation is the capacity to focus intensely on small, often overlooked components. Individuals with strong detail orientation can spot discrepancies or patterns that might elude others, allowing them to deliver highly accurate deliverables or outperform in roles requiring precision.⁴⁴

"I bother with the minutiae," explains one interviewee. "I get put on the things that require a fine-toothed comb to go through," says another. Research suggests neurodivergent individuals often possess this valuable strength, a competency critical for driving organizational excellence when leveraged thoughtfully.⁴⁵

THE MISPERCEPTION

Behind, off-topic, unpredictable

When these traits are misunderstood, neurodivergent professionals who think in bottom-up detail are often misinterpreted as not being on the same page as everyone else. They have questions that no one else sees a point in answering, they make moves that come across as antagonistic or rogue, and they seem focused on details that get in the way of progress.

Missed "why," missed results: *Damon always seems to be getting in trouble for asking, "Why are we doing it this way?" He's not trying to challenge anyone's authority; he simply cannot grasp the big picture without understanding the details. "I just want to understand the reason we're doing it this way so I can do it the right way," he explains. "If I don't know the 'why,' I feel like I'm playing baseball in the dark; I might hit a ball, but it won't be in any direction with any speed or power."*

Damon finds that the difference between whether he can shine on a team or not has everything to do with his manager's style. "What has made the difference between the bad and the good managers," he explains, "is, are they assuming I'm behaving in a malicious way because that's what they're used to [from someone with a lot of questions]? Or do they simply look at the work I do and how I fall within the boundaries of my job description?"

Damon says that after the military, he is no stranger to menial, tedious work, but he's not motivated unless he knows how it fits into the bigger picture. "If it needs to be done, I'll do it," he says, "I want my role to matter. I want the things that I do to matter." When he asks leaders questions in

an effort to understand that bigger picture, he wishes they understood that “I don’t know” is a sufficient answer—and that his questions are not attempts to highlight their ignorance.

We heard repeatedly that neurodivergent professionals are highly motivated when they understand the big picture and where their roles fit in. They dig deep to understand that picture and, once they do, they often bring above-average passion, insight, and work ethic to the job, as well as creative solutions that only come from a holistic, bottom-up understanding of the situation at hand. To their colleagues, they may seem like slow learners, unmotivated, or employing incomprehensible approaches to straightforward tasks. But for these neurodivergent professionals, when the big picture remains disconnected from the small, their productive and innovative potential lies dormant.

THE SHIFT

Build in the “why” and deploy volunteer advocates

Neuroinclusive teams build in the “why.” “The ‘why’ isn’t a slogan; it’s a journey,” says Perry Knoppert, founder of [The Octopus Movement](#). “When leaders bring people into the messy, human side of the vision, they create shared ownership.” To build in and reinforce the “why”—the intended business impact and how each contribution fits in—leaders and managers can repeat the answers to three simple questions: What difference are we making? Why does it matter? Where does your work fit in? “I thrive when managers provide structure—things like well-defined expectations, clear communication, and follow-through on what’s been discussed,” shared one interviewee. “When I know what’s expected of me and what success looks like, I can focus my energy on doing the work instead of trying to decode vague or shifting standards.”

Volunteer advocates are another powerful tool for bridging divides between neurodivergent team members and their managers, especially team

members who come across as slow learners or even poor performers due to their processing style. These advocates should be neurodivergent themselves or experienced allies, and they can step in when these team members have conflicts with their supervisors. “Neurotypical HR professionals and leaders vastly underestimate how many difficulties with this population come down to simple misunderstanding,” explains workplace neurodiversity expert and coach Isis Fabian. “Both sides universalize their ways of thinking, leading to wildly inaccurate assumptions, crossed wires, and broken trust. Neurodivergent advocates and coaches can bridge that gap.”

We find that those who have made it to senior positions are often eager to be of service to more junior professionals, who may be up against similar challenges to the ones they faced. Without advocates, those labeled poor performers when something else might be at play or struggling with something they’re afraid to disclose likely have nowhere to turn. One advocate told us a story of an employee whose performance lagged because he lost access to his ADHD medication due to a shortage. His manager and HR wanted to write him up, but our interviewee was able to step in in time to sit down with his manager and figure out a temporary performance plan while they waited for the shortage to end. Ultimately, everyone worked together and got through that challenging period without any negative repercussions.

With advocates in place for those who think and process differently, space is afforded to account for every detail and ensure that at least one team member attains mastery over the situation at hand. When every team member understands the “why,” they are more motivated and able to make better decisions at every level of execution. And with that detail-oriented, bottom-up approach enabled, output quality can reach new heights.

Learn more about how to achieve this shift on page 55.

The difficult transition from school to work

Several neurodivergent professionals we spoke with described a jarring transition from college to the workplace riddled with subtle, unspoken expectations, hierarchical considerations, cultural norms, and demands for collaboration that were not present in school. “I did not understand the transition from going to school versus being in the workplace,” explains one interviewee. “So, because I didn’t understand the social rules, I would often be on the receiving end of misunderstandings.” Undiagnosed at the time, this interviewee lost her first job out of college because she didn’t have access to this unwritten playbook that neurotypical peers seemed to pick up with ease.

“At school, accommodations are given and disabilities are much more freely talked about,” recalls an interviewee with dyslexia. Initially, she was open about her condition when she joined the workforce. She recalls a hiring interview with an elite consulting firm that went south as soon as she mentioned her condition. “They asked me, ‘What’s your greatest accomplishment?’ And I said, ‘Getting into [a top school] and getting through college with dyslexia.’” She was incredibly proud of the grit and determination she had demonstrated, not to mention the skills she’d gained in her uphill battle with

dyslexia throughout school. “Years later, I realized, that answer is what got me written off. Firms like that are old school; it’s easier to just not hire me.” When she did land her first job and continued to be open, she found her dyslexia invoked as the unresolvable cause behind her every mistake. “I was fresh out of school and telling people I was dyslexic, and they were using it against me,” she recounts. She realized too late the many risks and political factors at play in her workplace. Years later, she is once again open about her dyslexia, but now she’s much more strategic and talks about it in the context of her strengths.

Workplaces can smooth this difficult transition by offering cost-effective resources to entry-level workers. Career development funds tend to be reserved for more seasoned professionals, but our research has made clear that neurodivergent professionals need these resources more urgently when they’re just starting out. Neurodivergent-specific courses available on platforms like [Udemy](#) and group coaching options like “fishbowl coaching” (see page 59) are cost-effective ways to enable and activate these early-career professionals.



STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE

Kindness that outperforms niceness

Imagine...

Durable intra-team trust

Collaboration that prevails over competition

Communication that is clear and effective

Too often, the negative impacts of neurodivergent social behaviors are assumed to be intentional. Jamie's story illustrates how honest and vulnerable sharing about emotional needs and hurt feelings can bridge differences in social style that seem intractable otherwise:

Empathy-activated kindness: Jamie is a master of efficiency. They are the project manager spinning a hundred plates at once, the conductor creating a symphony from chaos. Communication, for Jamie, is merely a means of conveying information—what needs to be done, where someone needs to go, what went wrong—so, for time's sake, they don't put any frills on it.

One day, Jamie's manager, Phil, pulls them aside and delivers some surprising information: "Your team thinks you hate them." Phil goes on to share that almost every day, he has a member of Jamie's team in his office in tears because they don't see any positive affect from their manager. "You have to smile at them," Phil implores, "You have to say please and thank you."

Contrary to the conclusions often drawn from their stony, expressionless appearance, Jamie cares deeply about others' feelings. However, had the advice been simply to "smile more," Jamie would have bristled. But because Phil explained the context, he activated Jamie's deep sense of empathy. "The moment I was empathetic to [the team] feeling rejected, I couldn't stop smiling at them," Jamie recalls. "Then, I had to temper that so I didn't seem creepy or weird!"

Neurodivergent professionals who are naturally **candid** and **transparent** can bring a refreshing simplicity and clarity to team communication. Where they may fail to engage in superficial performances of niceness, true kindness and a deep desire for connection and camaraderie are common traits among the neurodivergent professionals we spoke to.

Unfortunately, in most work environments, niceness and social performance are table stakes for building warmth and trust. Without a neuroinclusive mindset, colleagues are likely to balk at blunt communication styles, neutral facial expressions, or a lack of eye contact.

Neuroinclusive teams prioritize a culture of meaningful kindness over performative niceness, using “Personal User Manuals” and signaling variations in communication style to foster authentic workplace relationships rooted in mutual respect and trust.

THE STRENGTHS UNLOCKED

Candor, transparency

Candor refers to the quality of being open, direct, and honest in communication, even when the message might be difficult or uncomfortable. For some neurodivergent individuals, being candid may come more naturally than engaging in neurotypical social conventions that prioritize diplomacy over frankness. Organizations that embrace candor rather than policing it can set off a ripple effect that creates a team-wide culture of trust and open communication.⁴⁶

“Stating a difficult truth is much easier for me than lying.”

– Neurodivergent professional

Transparency refers to someone’s tendency to communicate and share information openly and make their intentions and decision-making visible to others. For some neurodivergent individuals, transparency and

directness are a more natural communication style, with a preference for clear, literal language over implied meaning or unspoken expectations.⁴⁷

“Traditional hierarchy is a problem for me, and so is the expectation that you won’t speak plainly,” shares one neurodivergent professional. “If I could speak plainly at all times, work would be twice as easy.” Fostering greater transparency at work and facilitating more direct dialogue between different types of communicators can have big payoffs for organizations. Research on workplace dynamics shows that when colleagues and leaders are transparent, teams face less uncertainty and confusion, and level up on psychological safety and innovation.⁴⁸

THE MISPERCEPTION

Rude, unlikeable, socially inept

Blunt affront: *Aisling is tired of the time consumption involved in modifying their tone. “I’ve run into issues where I’m asked to communicate in a warmer and more friendly way,” they explain, “but when I have to shoot off dozens of messages an hour to manage a large, complex project, I literally don’t have the time to sit there and add what I perceive as superfluous, flowery, coddling language on top of every message.”*

Over and over, Aisling is told to be more “mindful” about how they address certain team members, but they can’t bring themselves to take the feedback seriously or own up to doing something wrong. “If someone is offended by a simple message like, ‘You have until three p.m. to review these slides,’ then I feel like they’re the one with a problem, not me.”

Anyone would consider their communication style to be blunt, but Aisling doesn’t understand what makes their approach implicitly offensive or unacceptable. “I’ve had managers think I don’t respect them just because I disagree with them or ask them questions,” they share. “I used to be oblivious to the role politics plays. I respected people—and expected myself to be respected—based on the importance of the work they do for the success of the organization. But I could be doing a ton more work than my peers and less respected than all of them; meanwhile, a senior

person who does nothing but get in the way has the most power and respect of anyone.”

To Aisling, respect in the form of deference is something to be earned and maintained through exemplary work products and the enablement of others. These priorities make logical sense, but in practice, Aisling’s inability to understand and navigate the emotional needs of team members leaves many colleagues distrustful and uncomfortable around them.

Some neurodivergent professionals communicate very directly and prioritize clear information-sharing over pleasantries, niceties, or subtext. As a result, they can be parsed as rude, dismissive, and even combative. These mismatched perceptions often result in a lose-lose situation for the direct communicator, where they either expend significant time and energy masking and repressing their natural style, or ignore tone-based feedback and risk poor performance reviews centered on this issue. One focus group participant, speaking on the professional persona she’s perfected through masking, reflects, “It’s helped my career, but it’s become the focal point where I have to show up and perform every day...When I’m done, I have nothing left at all, nothing for my poor family. Even breathing feels exhausting.”

Another neurodivergent professional shares the pain of having to lie in order to uphold workplace expectations of niceness and pleasantries: “When you walk in the office and someone asks, ‘Hey, how are you?’ you can’t just trauma dump on them. They want you to say, ‘Doing great!’ or, ‘Living the dream!’”

These mismatches in communication style and expectations can be further exacerbated by difficulties with social cues and unusual body language. “I tend to avoid eye contact and sometimes struggle with reading nonverbal cues,” explains one interviewee. “It can be misinterpreted as disinterest or a lack of engagement. I’ve had peers or managers assume that I’m not fully present, which makes it harder to build trust and rapport.”

As long as expectations for communication and interaction remain one-size-fits-all, many neurodivergent professionals will continue to suffer misperceptions and negative feedback, while their colleagues will continue to feel disrespected.

THE SHIFT

Use Personal User Manuals and signal communication style

Many professionals, neurodivergent or otherwise, may not realize how different their preferences and expectations really are from those of their colleagues. “Personal User Manuals” are an excellent way for every team member to articulate their unique thinking, working, and communication styles. Formats like the R.E.S.P.E.C.T. Framework for Neuroinclusive User Manuals from Pasha Marlowe, CEO of Neurobelonging (outlined in detail on page 64) give everyone the opportunity to think through—possibly for the first time—their personal factors for optimal work environments, recognition, scheduling, energy, communication, and more, and the chance to share that profile with their teams. This sets personalized expectations across the team that allow everyone to show up authentically with minimal misinterpretation of one another, while also providing an impetus for team members to expand their thinking and see how much of their own experience is not universal.

Neurodivergent consultant and coach Dr. Victoria Verlezza finds this type of norm-expanding to be especially important in physical workspaces. “If you require people to be in the office, there needs to be education around not policing others, not making comments about how people’s work is getting done,” she says. “Teams can agree to give one another the space to work how they do best.”

Beyond Personal User Manuals, there are simple options with broad visibility for how team members can continue to mitigate misperceptions and crossed wires, especially with cross-functional partners and even clients. Shared language or color-coded systems can be used to differentiate direct

communicators from conversational ones or quick/succinct responders from methodical/expressive ones. Email signatures and statuses or profiles on Slack and Teams are great places to employ these kinds of systems.

When teams deploy Personal User Manuals and signal their communication styles on email and messaging, they enable trust-building and reduce misunderstandings caused by tone and word choice. By sharing their unique personal profiles and needs, team members build camaraderie, reducing the risk of competition and increasing the desire to collaborate. Teams that understand one another and can see interactions from each other's perspectives can more easily give the benefit of the doubt and work together effectively.

Find more details and tools for employing Personal User Manuals and communication signals on page 64.

Ambiguous feedback doesn't land

Certain terms or phrases often used in feedback to neurodivergent professionals lend themselves to being seriously misinterpreted:

“Be respectful”: We heard that “respect,” for neurodivergent professionals, arises from regard for others’ abilities and contributions, so being told to “show respect” toward hierarchical superiors who appear to lack essential skills or expertise may cause confusion. Clear and specific expectations should be communicated instead.

“Be a team player”: Being told to be a better “team player” may lead neurodivergent professionals to advocate more for others, offer resources, and pitch in beyond their role. But this feedback often carries the opposite intent: a coded request to conform or avoid challenging the group.

“Be engaged”: For neurodivergent professionals we spoke to, engagement means focusing on the work and producing tangible outputs. Therefore, leaders asking for “more engagement” when they really want more visible participation in meetings or faster response times may generate the opposite effect.

The weight of intersections

Sexism, racism, ableism, and other systemic forces complicate and compound the challenges neurodivergent employees face, determining who is granted grace, who is scrutinized, and who is punished.

Several neurodivergent women we spoke with describe a double standard in how they are treated compared to neurodivergent men. “I’ve seen a lot more allowance for eccentricity and a freer approach to managing neurodivergent male leaders,” one woman shares. “There seems to be more willingness to judge based on results. Women, meanwhile, are tightly managed to fit the norm. I’ve seen social harm shrugged off as part of the package men bring because they get results, but women have to uphold all the social norms and be pleasing to everyone while disrupting the status quo.”

This double bind shows up in feedback as well. Another woman recalls, “There are things I got ‘coached on’ a man never would have—expectations about how women should behave and react play into it. Just by being direct and not doing small talk, I got this label: ‘You’re a human doing, not a human being.’” Others describe the constant demand to mask and soften themselves: “As women, we’re expected to camouflage, to mask, to bend ourselves—not just from a neurotypical perspective, but from a gender perspective,” shares one woman. “As an autistic woman, I have had multiple people—usually men—comment on my lack of facial expression,” recalls another. “[They’re] always assuming I am angry or annoyed at them if I’m just pensive.”

Every additional identity brings its own factors. As a neurodivergent veteran reminds us: “Veterans have additional ‘neurospicy’ complications such as PTSD and physical disabilities that complicate this life.”

The compounding effect of multiple marginalized identities is most starkly visible in the words of a Black AuDHD woman: “My back is wrought with scars from being stabbed in the back.” Mia, a lawyer, shares this heavy

sentiment as she recalls the countless workplace friendships that turned out not to be friendships at all. “Working in a corporate setting is laden with impenetrable neurotypical norms. It’s almost entirely governed by status, politics, subtleties, covert language, and favoritism,” she explains. “Thriving as someone who is innately low-status requires strong social connections, know-how, and emotional intelligence. So, in other words—very difficult, high barriers for me.”

Mia describes how even neutral traits become liabilities: “My baseline affect was pretty expressionless. People thought I was mean or rude. My managers often felt like I was challenging them or their authority.” In one example, a senior White woman that Mia reported to would happily go toe-to-toe with a White man on the team, “but when I said something,” Mia recalls, “she got very angry.” The consequences of biases and assumptions leveraged against Mia have been relentless: “I’ve been yelled at privately and publicly. Berated, insulted, undermined, talked down to by managers. Chastised. All of it.”

No one suffers more for the dearth of human-centered research and education on neurodiversity than those existing at intersections like Mia’s. As long as workplace stigma remains unchecked and White-male-centric understandings of autism, ADHD, and other forms of neurodivergence prevail, people like Mia can’t even find one another, never mind a sense of belonging among neurotypical peers.

6

STRATEGIC ADVANTAGE

Next-level processing power

Imagine...

Bringing a project vision to life with minimal need for intervention

Tapping into unparalleled institutional memory to avoid duplicate work and mistakes

Synthesizing large volumes of cross-functional input with ease

When different minds on a single team operate in vastly different ways, communication and continuous feedback are essential. Max's story makes clear how even assets like human super-processors become ineffective without those feedback loops in place:

Speed spoiled by mistrust: Max can synthesize and manipulate a lot of information in her head at once. She notices that most people solve complex problems by breaking them into smaller parts and addressing each sequentially, while she is “able to tackle a bigger part at a time because I can stuff it all in my brain and apply a mathematical model to it.”

Max compares her thinking to the difference between many small computers working on a problem versus a single supercomputer: “Sometimes, you need one supercomputer to make things a lot more efficient. My ability to memorize and visualize many things at the same time kind of works like that big computer.”

But because Max's mind works so differently than those of her colleagues, she misses opportunities to build trust, collaborate, and bring others' unique strengths into her approach. A cycle of broken trust plays out: peers feel intimidated by the speed of Max's thinking and fail to ask her important questions or deliver critical feedback, leading to judgment from Max when she feels they aren't pulling their weight and missed opportunities for Max to understand their perspectives.

As Max continues to advance, her gaps in interpersonal skills grow more glaring. Without effective feedback loops

and coaching to bridge those gaps, more and more of her energy sinks into interpersonal friction, and less is available to deliver the processing power she's known for.

Many neurodivergent professionals embody the powerful skills of **independence, strong memory, and information synthesis** that make this strategic advantage attainable, delivering processing power that the whole team can tap into.

However, when they don't bring their colleagues along, they miss opportunities to collaborate and energize the broader team. They appear to operate in a "black box," colleagues struggle to trust and understand them, and unnecessary tension arises.

With neurodivergent-specific coaching and a culture of continuous, actionable feedback, neurodiverse teams can complement one another's strengths, improve collaboration by learning about their interpersonal impact in real time, and deploy special capacities like information synthesis to maximum effect.

THE STRENGTHS UNLOCKED

Independence, memory, information synthesis

Independence in the context of this report refers to the ability to execute complex tasks and processes autonomously, sometimes in ways that seem opaque to others. Professionals who are particularly independent and self-sufficient may be capable of bringing a project or vision from start to finish on their own, with little to no direction. As one interviewee describes, "I work best independently...in a 'group project' format, I either end up taking over other people's work or getting frustrated with them being too slow." When independence is managed within an ecosystem of trust and communication, it becomes a strength that can accelerate timelines and streamline execution rather than act as a barrier to teamwork.

Memory in this context refers to how individuals retain and retrieve information over time. Those with exceptional memory capacity can become living archives of institutional knowledge or subject-matter experts on high-value topics. “I recall a lot of information with no issue and always have,” shares one neurodivergent professional. “I could tell you what I was doing during every month of my life. Sometimes, I have two to three hundred projects going on at once.” Research suggests some neurodivergent individuals exhibit enhanced working memory capacity and above-average factual retention when engaging with subjects of interest.⁴⁹ Teams that can draw on this rich long-term recall can avoid reinventing the wheel with every project and make more informed, efficient decisions.

Information synthesis, as defined in this study, refers to the ability to take in, organize, and analyze large volumes of new information. Individuals with strong information synthesis can process quickly, making them excellent at mentally organizing and making meaning from large amounts of data. In dynamic workplaces, this strength can translate to improved cross-functional collaboration, faster and better decision-making, and the ability to pivot processes on a dime.

“When I’m in a meeting with five different stakeholders, all bringing competing goals and perspectives, I’m taking it all in and synthesizing the one path that will make everyone happy. Where others may see chaos, or a conversation gone off the rails, I can always bring us into alignment on a clear step forward.”

- Neurodivergent professional

THE MISPERCEPTION

Untrustworthy, unclear, cold

Entrenched stories build hostility: Sarah's output is consistently exceptional. She absorbs new information quickly and delivers polished work on time. Her independence is one of her greatest strengths—she prioritizes effectively and communicates when there's something substantive to share, avoiding noise for its own sake.

But in a workplace culture where constant updates signal competence, her efficiency is misread. Without frequent check-ins and repetition about what she's working on, colleagues wonder how she's spending her time and begin to see her as untrustworthy and distant. No one raises these perceptions directly, so they fester. Months later, they surface in formal reviews—like when she was reprimanded for not providing same-day answers to non-urgent Slack messages, even though this had happened only twice in eight months.

"I should hear that feedback sooner, and ideally from the actual person with the issue," Sarah says. "Now, because the specific situation wasn't addressed in the moment, it's become a story or narrative about me. Months later, it's harder to undo impressions and judgments that have been held onto over time."

She believes part of the problem is that feedback often doesn't focus on the work itself. "There isn't much effort put into communicating the feedback in a productive way that the person can actually relate to and understand—feedback about what's working and what isn't working well, in terms of the actual work," she explains. Sarah finds that unseen challenges like navigating unfamiliar corporate environments or struggling to gain traction with certain team members explain her negative performance outcomes rather than laziness or incompetence. "So, let's talk about what went right or wrong on this project, about the circumstances and support needed," she says, "instead of focusing on each person and their 'competence.'"

Unaddressed misunderstandings and undelivered feedback break trust, slow innovation, and bog down top talent. One very independent high performer describes being perpetually at odds with her former manager, and how over many years, they never had an open conversation about their dynamic. Ultimately, the high performer felt she had to leave the organization. “I often had to ‘ask forgiveness not permission’ with this manager, just to make sure our team was meeting our deadlines and obligations to other teams and clients,” recalls this interviewee. “In retrospect, she probably thought I was shockingly insubordinate and felt if she couldn’t control me, there was no point in me being there, no matter how talented I was.”

Without candid, actionable, and continuous 360-degree feedback, toxic dynamics like these deepen quickly: Both sides develop inaccurate narratives about one another that diverge further from reality over time. And frustrated top performers, unless they get the coaching that will bring them into alignment with leadership, will head for the door.

THE SHIFT

Offer coaching and deliver continuous feedback

Continuous feedback, combined with coaching resources, can enable neurodiverse teams to bridge interpersonal gaps and tap into one another’s strengths effectively. To enable implementation and avoid bias, feedback should be delivered in a structured format like the SBI (Situation-Behavior-Impact) model.⁵⁰ This structure outlines the situation in which the behavior occurred, describes the specific behavior itself, and specifies the positive or negative impact it had on the business or team. If feedback can’t be structured this way, it’s a signal that personal biases or narrow preferences may be at play. Team members should receive feedback on a weekly, if not daily, basis to ensure it feels like a routine part of “business as usual” rather than a performance crisis. “People leaders need to be trained on giving feedback that’s process- and deliverable-based, not characteristic-based,” points out neurodivergent consultant and coach Dr. Victoria Verlezza. “We

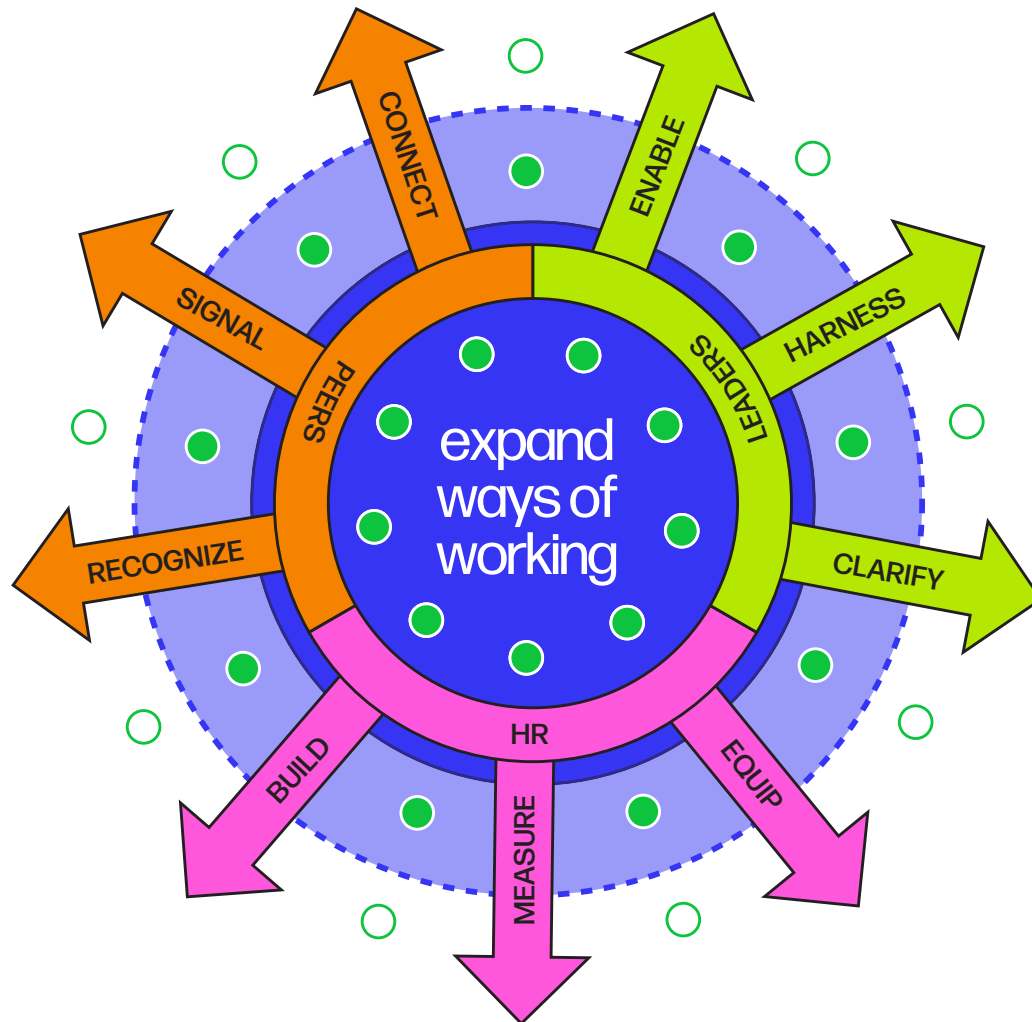
assume people leaders know what they're doing when it comes to feedback, but they don't."

Coaching, another critical resource, can take many forms—one-on-ones, fishbowl, group—and when it comes to neurodivergent professionals, it's imperative they receive it from coaches who understand the way they think. Neurodivergent-specialized coaches can help with everything from getting organized to navigating unspoken professional norms to improving relationships. As one neurodivergent professional who went through coaching shares, "Now, I'm more mellow, I let things go, and I shine more. I have way more capacity, and I just got promoted." Such coaches can also help managers to better connect with and take a strengths-based approach to their neurodiverse teams.

When organizations offer targeted career coaching and make clear, continuous feedback a normal part of a team's daily practice, fast-thinking team members who are hard to understand and connect with can learn how to share their knowledge. Their insights and institutional memory become accessible to all. By hearing feedback that is contextualized to a specific situation, identifies the actual behavior causing friction, and articulates its impact on the team or business, processing powerhouses can build a two-way street of support and communication with their peers. This enables communication with—and synthesization of inputs from—a much wider audience, to the benefit of the team and the organization as a whole.

For more details on coaching and feedback, see pages 59 and 73.

The Neuroinclusion Operating System



The stories in this report show in painful detail that the unique strengths neurodivergent professionals bring to work are too often invalidated, misunderstood, and even vilified by restrictive workplace norms. One-off accommodations will never close this gap nor win companies the dividends we've outlined.

We find true neuroinclusion requires expanding ways of working to capture the full potential of talent on the margins, leveraging universal design principles to optimize the performance of the *entire* workforce, not just neurodivergent workers.

Rather than keeping traditional workplace norms fixed and trying to accommodate difference at the edges, this approach to neuroinclusion goes a step further, operating as a lever for business transformation: by making workplace norms and expectations adaptive enough to expand and encompass whatever talent walks in the door, businesses unlock greater innovation, resilience, and capacity.

Building on the misperceptions and missed opportunities outlined in the previous section, this business lever comes to life in our **Neuroinclusion Operating System**. Through three playbooks, we deliver the practical actions for HR, leaders, and peers to expand ways of working by defaulting to flexibility, measuring what matters, presuming capability, designing for edge cases, and building adaptive systems. When HR, leaders, and peers each apply this ethos to their respective zones of influence, they don't simply foster inclusion; they collectively reshape and future-proof the organization into one that is dynamic, responsive, and positioned to thrive amid ambiguity and technological disruption.

HR's Neuroinclusive Infrastructure Playbook

The systems, processes, and resources built by HR lay the foundation for our neuroinclusion operating system. HR's role is to embed supportive systems that provide every employee with the opportunity to succeed. HR is the conductor, creating and sustaining the infrastructure for leaders, managers, and individual contributors to play their parts, integrating practices and tools that will bring out the best performance, communication, and collaboration in everyone.

This playbook highlights three core levers for HR: **build** dynamic systems into the operational core; **equip** teams with adaptable tools, templates, and coaching; and **measure** everything from tool use to performance with a neuroinclusive lens. Together, these practices ensure that neuroinclusion is not dependent on individual goodwill alone but is instead enabled by organizational structures.

Build: Operationalized choice and flexibility

True flexibility isn't built on ad hoc exceptions; it comes from embedding choice directly into the structures and norms of work so employees don't have to fight for it or wonder what's possible. A consistent system that balances clarity with choice reduces friction and allows people to contribute at their best. This can be accomplished through:

- **Consistently applied flexibility frameworks and systemic optionality:**

Flexible work options are too often discretionary, resulting in uneven access and unnecessary friction. Workplace systems should flex before individuals are forced to. HR can lead by embedding flexibility and clarity into core design, with consistency, transparency, and clear parameters for managerial discretion.

- Clarify flexibility parameters in job architecture and team norms, including what's fixed organization-wide and what's negotiable at the team level. Include universal

best practices like agenda-first meetings, focus time, and camera-optional meeting participation.

- Empower managers to enact flexibility within role boundaries without needing to escalate every decision or request.
- Retire the idea of “accommodation” as exceptional; replace it with structured flexibility available to all employees.

■ **Multi-modal, transparent pathways for advancement:** Mobility systems often reward visibility, self-advocacy, and informal sponsorship—barriers for many high-performing but low-visibility contributors.

- Develop readiness maps showing multiple ways to demonstrate growth beyond visibility and self-promotion.
- Pilot peer-nominated advancement programs for underrecognized contributors.
- Rebuild compensation structures and leveling around specific responsibilities and outputs, rather than titles, to enable flexible role creation and incentivize high-output individuals to take on more.
- Regularly audit promotion data to surface and address patterns in assessment that emphasize communication style or personality rather than capturing skill or impact.
- Develop advancement pathways for individual contributors who lack the necessary skill sets for management but whose expertise and speed are invaluable to the organization.

Equip: Tools, templates, and coaching for managers and teams

Well-deployed resources from HR enable time-scarce managers and teams to expand ways of working without having to take on more work themselves. When employees and managers can access simple, straightforward resources that tie directly to their development needs and goals as a team, neuroinclusion can gradually become the default instead of feeling like an extra task. HR can accomplish this by providing:

- **Specialized coaching, advocacy, and skill-sharing in a variety of formats:** Between external coaches and deeply knowledgeable employees waiting to be tapped, organizations already have at their fingertips powerful resources for supporting and upskilling a neurodiverse workforce.
 - **One-on-one skill-building and culture navigating:** Neurodivergent-specialized coaching groups like [Lexxic](#) can provide coaches to help neurodivergent employees build critical skills in organization, workflow, prioritization, workload management, communication, and much more. “In the two concentrated hours of coaching I had, I learned a lot, and I wish I’d had it in my twenties,” shared one interviewee who worked with a Lexxic coach.
 - **Manager coaching:** Coaches specializing in neurodiversity can also support managers of neurodiverse teams, helping them navigate performance issues, understand behavioral patterns, and bridge communication divides.
 - **Group coaching and “fishbowl” coaching:** Coaching multiple professionals at once who are facing similar challenges is a cost-effective way to support a greater population of neurodivergent employees. Often, it is junior neurodivergent staff who need the most help, yet they are typically the least likely to receive career development resources. Neurodivergent coaches like [Isis Fabian](#) specialize in virtual group coaching as well as “fishbowl” coaching, where up to 200 people can learn vicariously as they watch spotlighted volunteers receive coaching and engage with one another in the chat. “Fishbowl coaching is especially effective for this population because we tend to face similar workplace challenges, and our pattern recognition helps us learn from others’ stories,” says Fabian. “Junior people especially

understand their challenges better as they hear others articulate them, and low-verbal or camera-off participants can listen and learn, while slower processors make use of the chat.”

- **Employee resource group (ERG) skill-sharing:** Neurodiversity ERGs are ripe with company-specific insights, tools, and strategies for navigating neurodivergence at work. Our interviewees and focus group participants told us that even unstructured, informal gatherings provide invaluable ideas and resources garnered from fellow neurodivergent professionals working in the same corporate environment.
- **Neurodiversity allies and advocates:** Seasoned professionals who are neurodivergent themselves, or deeply familiar with experiences of neurodivergence, are aware of communication and perception gaps that stand in the way of advancement for this population, and are often eager to bridge them. As one interviewee shares, “As I advance in my career, I find myself wanting to take on more of a protector role for those people I recognize in the situation I was in when I first entered the workforce.” One simple way to offer this resource is to set up an intranet page providing bios for such advocates with invitations to reach out for support on performance issues or interpersonal and managerial conflicts.
- **Flexibility Menu:** A shared document or conversation guide to help teams clarify when, how, and where work happens best. Provide clear boundaries for manager discretion versus company-wide policy. This can be deployed to the benefit of the whole team without requiring personal disclosure of neurodivergence or other conditions.

How to use: Use this during team norm-setting, onboarding, realignment, or role transition. Managers and team members fill the menu out together and revisit it quarterly or after organizational changes. See the following page for a detailed example of a flexibility menu.

Category (with example policy)	Team agreement (examples provided)	Notes/exceptions (examples provided)
Core working hours Managers can flex workday start and end times up to two hours on each end but must ensure all team member schedules contain 40 hours per week.	Full team must be online or in-office from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.	This does not apply during our busy season, when the full team must keep the same hours.
Meeting hours Managers can designate up to three consistent working hours a day for their teams to be unavailable for meetings.	No meetings before 10 a.m. or after 3 p.m.	One-on-ones, if mutually agreed, can fall outside these hours.
Camera expectations Cameras are not required to be on for internal meetings.	Audio-only default for team meetings; exception for monthly brainstorm (all cameras on).	Anyone can be camera-on at any time if they prefer.
Participation expectations All meeting attendees are expected to participate. Managers can design how this participation is ensured.	All attendees should be prepared to be called upon for their ideas, reactions, and insights.	Participants are expected to be honest when they don't know something or weren't paying attention, rather than waste time pretending.
Agenda expectations All cross-functional meetings must contain agendas in order for attendance to be mandatory. Managers can set their own agenda expectations for internal team meetings.	Internal one-on-ones do not require agendas, but all other internal meetings do; otherwise, attendees are allowed to decline.	The agenda should include purpose, not just activity (for instance, "align on next steps for project X" versus "discuss project X").
Focus time All employees are entitled to 1.5 hours of uninterrupted focus time per day, during which their Teams status must reflect they are in focus time. Managers can determine optimal focus time windows for their teams.	The full team takes focus time outside of core hours.	Rachel and Sam have opted out of taking focus time.
Notification response norms Employees are expected to reply or acknowledge receipt of messages within four business hours and emails within one business day. Managers can set different expectations within their teams.	Within the team, acknowledge receipt and provide any available information in response to messages and emails within four business hours.	Within the team, truly urgent issues should come via text message or call.
No-meeting days We observe a firmwide "no-meeting" day on the last Friday of every month. Managers can designate an additional no-meeting day each month for their teams.	The first Friday of every month will be our team's additional no-meeting day.	We will communicate these days to clients and the importance of heads-down time to serve them effectively.
Preferred meeting formats Managers and their teams can take whatever approach to meeting formats that most suits their needs. This includes the option to minimize or avoid live meetings.	We will default to asynchronous communications rather than meetings for info-sharing (such as project updates), as well as prioritize real-time collaboration in meetings.	Updates on company-wide policy and changes will still happen in live meetings to ensure discussion time.

- **Strengths Mapping Canvas:** A conversation tool for managers to identify what energizes someone, where they need support, and how their strengths can stretch and scale.

How to use: Use during onboarding, midyear check-ins, and team development conversations as part of a strengths-based approach to management. Refer to the Harness section of the **Leaders' Neuroinclusive Management Playbook** on page 70 for additional guidance on taking a strengths-based approach.

STEP 1

Independent strength identification

Have the team member independently review and research this non-exhaustive list of strengths so they can come to the strength-mapping conversation with their 5 to 10 top strengths in mind.

- | | | |
|--|---|---|
| ☐ Hyperfocus | ☐ Creativity | ☐ Calm under pressure |
| ☐ Outside-the-box thinking | ☐ Multitasking | ☐ Helpfulness/altruism |
| ☐ Systems thinking | ☐ Superior memory | ☐ Honesty and transparency |
| ☐ Pattern recognition | ☐ Speed/productivity | ☐ Bottom-up processing |
| ☐ Curiosity/novelty seeking | ☐ Organization | ☐ Methodical approach |
| ☐ Fast learning | ☐ Independence | ☐ Skill mastery |
| ☐ Information synthesis | ☐ Comfort in conflict | |
| ☐ Clear communication | ☐ Detail orientation | |
| ☐ Relationship-building | ☐ Adapting to/embracing change | |

STEP 2

Interactive strength mapping

Sit down together to review the team member’s strengths and answer the following questions.

Question	Notes from conversation
Which strengths would you like to use more often?	
Which tasks or types of work come most easily to you?	
What drains you or requires more recovery time?	
Which skills or areas do you want opportunities to grow in?	
How would you ideally rearrange your workload to make the best use of your strengths?	
How can your strengths benefit the team in new ways?	

- **Personal User Manual template:** A self-authored tool that outlines how someone works best, shared with peers and managers for smoother collaboration. The following template uses the R.E.S.P.E.C.T. Framework for Neuroinclusive User Manuals from Pasha Marlowe, CEO of Neurobelonging.

How to use: Ideally on slides or in another easily editable and presentable format, have team members (including leads and managers) fill out each category and prompt them individually. Then, share in a team “user manual roundtable.” Update and reshare quarterly, or whenever new team members join.

R.E.S.P.E.C.T. element	Prompt	My input
Recognition	How do you like to receive praise and acknowledgment? How can teammates gain insight into your work and contributions? How do you prefer to receive and answer questions about your work and your thought process?	
Environment	What kind of physical or digital setup helps you focus and do your best work? How can colleagues support this optimal environment for you in their day-to-day interactions with you?	
Support/ access/ sensory needs	Are there any formal/informal accommodations or practices that help you thrive? What, if any, sensory challenges do you manage, and how do you manage them? Anything else about your work setup or accessories that you wish to proactively explain to your teammates?	
Productivity tools	How do you organize tasks, track progress, and manage complexity? How can colleagues help you stay on top of your to-do list?	
Energy and workflow	When are your most and least productive times? How does your energy fluctuate throughout the week and around high-intensity projects? What unique strengths can you tap into when your workflow is optimized?	
Communication style	What are some ways your communication style is commonly misread? How do you prefer to give and receive feedback? Do you prefer fast or reflective responses? Verbal or written communication? What does your collaboration style look like? Do you prioritize relationship-building or information exchange when communicating?	
Time and scheduling	What recurring obligations or blocks on your calendar should colleagues be aware of? How much notice do you need for scheduled meetings? What times of day are best for your scheduling? What support would you love from colleagues on your time and calendar management?	

- **Communication Signals Guide:** A lightweight way to communicate work style, bandwidth, or needs without formal requests.

How to use: Adapt one or more of these sets of signals and symbols for use on messaging platforms and in email signatures to fit your team's needs. Agree on shared language and meaning and set expectations for everyone to participate so neurodivergent professionals are not singled out.

Leading communication styles - Internal: Signals for individuals to convey their primary communication styles via internal messaging platform (e.g., Teams, Slack) statuses or profile elements.

Status/profile element	Meaning
"Style: DIRECT" ●	Expect straightforward, no-frills communication from me. I'll get straight to the point and appreciate up-front asks without small talk.
"Style: RELATIONAL" ●	I need to build the relationship before I'm confident working together. Expect outreach with a personal touch.
"Style: THOUGHTFUL" ●	I think about things deeply. Expect extensive and detailed replies and considerations.
"Style: CONTEXTUAL" ●	Expect a lot of questions from me. I need context in order to deliver the right thing the right way.

Leading communication styles - External: Signals for individuals to convey their primary communication styles via email signatures, bios, or other highly visible and far-reaching professional profiles.

Style	Signature note
Direct, all business, quick to respond	"My communication style: short, fast, and to the point. It's nothing personal!"
Needs processing time, includes context, slower to respond	"My communication style: thoughtful, methodical, and thorough. Thank you for your patience!"
Prefers some small talk, builds relationships, high emotional intelligence	"My communication style: friendly, warm, and relationship-centered. Tell me about you!"
Systems thinker, in the weeds, asks a lot of questions	"My communication style: structured, detail-oriented, and precise. Clarity is kind!"
Big-picture/visionary thinker, moving fast, ideas and alignment over details	"My communication style: big-picture, high-level, and alignment-seeking. If I miss important details, feel free to follow up!"

- **SBI Feedback Model⁵¹:** A framework and set of prompts to make feedback objective and actionable. Managers can add a coaching mindset to the traditional SBI feedback model by including curiosity and supporting reflection.

How to use: Use in one-on-ones or after key moments (positive or challenging). Use a neutral tone and invite dialogue.

Element	Prompt	Notes
Situation	“During [situation]...”	
Behavior	“I noticed [behavior]...”	
Impact	“Which had the effect of [impact]...”	
Support lens	“Is there anything you needed in that moment that would have helped?”	
Next time	“How can I (or we) support a different outcome next time?”	

Measure: Equitable performance assessment

HR has a bird’s-eye view of employee data and direct control over critical organization-wide performance and hiring processes, making the lever of measurement and assessment one of its strongest tools for pursuing neuroinclusion. With the right practices in place, the untapped potential of neurodivergent talent can be properly channeled, tools and flexible options can be honed over time, and barriers can be removed for high-quality candidates who may not fit the pre-existing cultural mold. HR can accomplish this shift through:

- **Flexible, fact-based hiring practices:** Hiring processes tend to favor quick thinking, polished delivery, and confidence. These traits are not always correlated with sustained high performance or innovation. As one interviewee shares, “Once I’m on the job, everyone is in awe of my capabilities—but getting in the door is nearly impossible for me. For all the jobs I’ve ever interviewed for, I’ve made it to late-stage interviews for maybe ten percent of them.” Another puts this experience more

succinctly: “I know I have so much to offer, but traditional hiring processes often feel like they’re designed to weed people like me out before I even get the chance to show it.”

- Train hiring teams to anchor evaluations in evidence of skill, rather than fluency or familiarity.
- Offer candidates the option to interview via written, task-based, or asynchronous formats.
- Use structured rubrics to minimize halo effects in candidate assessment.
- **Flexible performance feedback architecture:** Most performance tools still assume one cadence, one style, and one form of contribution. This flattens talent.
 - Introduce multiple performance pathways (e.g., feedback-based, outcome-based, reflection-based) aligned with different working styles.
 - Add a “conditions for success” section to performance reviews and onboarding to document what environments or supports help someone thrive.
 - Train managers to evaluate strengths in context, not against a narrow behavioral template.
 - Deliver feedback in advance in writing to those who need more processing time. As one neurodivergent professional shares about receiving performance feedback in writing, “It allows me to process the information at my own pace, reflect on it, and formulate any necessary responses or clarifications. Written feedback also provides clarity, which helps me understand expectations and avoid miscommunication that might occur in verbal discussions, especially when things are fast-paced or high-pressure.”
- **Integration into workforce metrics:** Without measurement, systemic gaps persist. Neuroinclusion metrics can be embedded into existing dashboards and decision cycles.
 - Track the uptake of options and flexible arrangements, adding new ones and sunsetting old ones in response to usage rates.

- Include psychological safety questions in pulse surveys, with attention to work style variance. These example questions are inspired by Amy C. Edmondson's foundational work on the topic:⁵²
 - » "I can speak my mind without fear of reprisal."
 - » "My ideas are valued by my team and manager."
 - » "I get to co-create the culture on my team."
 - » "I'm not afraid to ask questions or admit I don't know something."
 - » "I'm empowered to deliver at my full potential."
- Monitor mobility and attrition trends among employees flagged for high contribution but low visibility.

Leaders' Neuroinclusive Management Playbook

Leaders, whether frontline managers or senior executives, set the tone for how teams actually operate day to day. Neuroinclusion at the leadership and management level is about setting and reinforcing norms and practices that enable team members to lean on their strengths and make the highest-caliber contributions possible. This playbook elaborates on three core levers for managers and leaders: **enable** talent through flexibility and optionality; **harness** the team's full potential through a strengths-based approach; and **clarify** purpose with feedback, psychological safety, and the "why."

Enable: Optionality in how work gets done

Leaders can reduce friction and improve productivity by giving people more than one way to meet expectations. Having options doesn't mean a lack of structure; it means allowing individuals to choose how they participate and deliver best. As one interviewee tells us, "My brain is wired for pattern recognition, big-picture thinking, and creative problem-solving, but when I'm pressured to fit a narrow mold of productivity or communication, it's hard to tap into those strengths." This optionality can be accomplished through:

- **Flexible schedules and focus time:** Building in flexibility helps employees align work with their best energy and concentration windows while still honoring team commitments.
 - Allow adjusted commuting times if you have in-office requirements, enabling team members to maximize their personal and professional efficiency by avoiding time wasted in traffic and aligning work hours to their optimal energy windows.
 - Establish "core hours" when meetings are permitted, and monthly or weekly "no-meeting" days. "I was on a project that had hard and fast meeting windows, 10 a.m. to 12 p.m., 1 p.m. to 3 p.m.," shares one focus group participant. "It had to come from leadership down. It was *amazing*."

- Support remote work where possible, and normalize blocks of uninterrupted “focus time” when messages can go unanswered for a few hours.
- Use the Flexibility Menu on page 61 to formalize team expectations and opportunities for flexibility.
- **Expanded meeting norms:** Meetings should be designed for inclusion, not conformity. Leaders can set expectations that focus on outcomes and contributions rather than requiring everyone to engage in the same way.
 - Accept camera-off participation in meetings and set clear expectations for engagement based on contributions rather than appearances or airtime.
 - Provide multiple ways to engage, both during the meeting (e.g., verbal, chat) and after (e.g., written notes, follow-ups).
- **HR tools and templates:** HR can make simple, intuitive tools and templates available and easy to access, but it's up to managers and leaders to put them into practice.
 - Make use of shared language for communication style signals on Slack, Teams, and email (see page 65) to preempt misunderstandings and misreadings of one another.
 - Create Personal User Manuals (see the template on page 64) to socialize differences in working and communication styles.
 - Leverage tools like the SBI Feedback Model (page 64) and Flexibility Menu (page 61).
 - Reach out to HR to request tools and templates you need but don't currently have.

Harness: Unique team strengths

A strengths-based approach to talent management shifts the focus from fixing weaknesses to amplifying what people do best. By identifying and investing in individual and team strengths, managers can unlock higher engagement, greater resilience, more consistent performance, and higher retention. As one neurodivergent professional puts it, “When I have a manager who sees my skills clearly and is not threatened by me, they

automatically work to expand my scope of influence and smooth over the gaps in my soft skills. It's a really beautiful symbiosis." Managers can accomplish this shift to strengths-based management through these steps:

- 1 Presume competence:** Start from the belief that every individual has ability, insight, and potential, even if they are expressed in ways that differ from the norm. Presuming competence ensures that neurodivergent employees receive meaningful opportunities, responsibilities, and respect rather than automatically being sidelined or underestimated.
- 2 Check yourself:** Ask yourself the following questions to uncover strengths or better approaches that may be hiding in plain sight:
 - Do your high-output people have recovery built into their work?
 - Who is labeled "difficult" but may be spotting risk?
 - How differently do you treat and assess those who don't think the way you do?
 - How objective and actionable has your feedback been?
 - What common neurodivergent traits in this report have you encountered on your team?
- 3 Detail tasks and workstreams according to their most critical activities:** To see clearly which strengths align with which workstreams, identify the most important activities behind each workstream and the skills necessary to do it well. Invite your team to help you interrogate where there are opportunities to approach workstreams differently and identify which skills are true non-negotiables versus traditional but not necessary.
- 4 Assign strength reflection to new and existing team members:** Give team members a non-exhaustive list of workplace strengths to research and ask them to come back with what they believe their 5 to 10 greatest strengths are (see page 62 for the Strengths Mapping Canvas that includes this first step).

- 5 Map team strengths:** Use the conversation guide in the Strengths Mapping Canvas on page 63 to identify each team member's strengths and brainstorm new ways to apply them.
- 6 Stretch strengths through growth opportunities:** Adjust workloads to take full advantage of team members' strengths, allowing them to compensate for one another's weaker areas. Assign stretch assignments and growth opportunities according to strengths, ensuring you provide increased visibility for work that isn't naturally in the spotlight.
- 7 Fill complementary gaps:** After identifying opportunities for team members to fill one another's gaps with their strengths, work closely with HR to ensure creative role changes come with commensurate leveling and pay. When opening new roles, do so with an eye toward the strengths needed to fill the team's existing gaps rather than taking the traditional route of replicating the skills already represented on the team.
- 8 Revisit and adjust annually:** Perform the full Strengths Mapping Canvas (page 62) annually, giving team members (especially those with fewer years of experience) the opportunity to hone their understanding of their abilities and apply the previous year's learning to their strength map and goals.

Clarify: Purpose and norms

As Brené Brown says, "Clear is kind. Unclear is unkind."⁵³ When team members know what they're doing, how it fits into the bigger picture, and why it matters, they can be more efficient, confident, and creative in their work. Clarity also means communicating a vision that the whole team can see, which requires open dialogue, ideation, and questioning. This open space only becomes possible with role modeling from leaders. As one interviewee shares, "I've had managers who took the time to understand how I work, who created space for open and honest conversations, and who didn't

judge me for needing clarity, reassurance, or a different approach. That kind of psychological safety made a huge difference—I wasn't wasting energy masking or worrying I was falling short, so I could actually show up fully and do my best." Leaders and managers can accomplish this clarity through:

- **Constructive challenge:** If team members are too afraid to voice their concerns, questions, and points of confusion, then valuable time and resources will be wasted as they work with only partial information and buy-in.
 - Acknowledge your own blind spots and invite others to push back ("Tell me what I'm not seeing here").
 - Create space for dialogue by moving beyond the perfunctory "any questions?" and sincerely soliciting input and building in time for Q&A.
 - Say "I don't know" when you don't, share mistakes you've made and what you learned, and praise others for doing the same.
 - Call on team members and ask them explicitly to share their concerns (e.g., "David, what concerns do you have about this approach?"). Even if no one has concerns, the opportunity to either voice them or verbalize support for your vision will build buy-in.
 - Articulate your own thought process (e.g., "This idea didn't make sense to me at first, but once I considered X and Y factors, I realized it makes a lot of sense") and learning journey (e.g., "When I first heard about this product, I felt totally out of my depth").
- **Continuous feedback:** When feedback only comes during the performance cycle, it is often stale, incomplete, and too infrequent to be useful. Feedback, both constructive and reinforcing, should be delivered swiftly to have the greatest impact. This means weekly, if not daily, feedback for team members about how their contributions and deliverables are landing so they can adjust in real time and develop as much as possible between performance cycles.
 - Send quick feedback over messaging after team members' performance in presentations and cross-functional meetings.

- Collect 360-degree feedback regularly, and treat all feedback as useful. If you can't implement it directly, explain your reasoning.
 - Encourage team members to ask for feedback every time they complete a project.
 - Construct feedback to be actionable, clear, and objective by using a framework like the SBI Feedback Model: outline the situation in which the behavior occurred, describe the specific behavior itself, and specify the positive or negative impact it had on the business or the team (see page 66 for the SBI tool).
 - Deliver feedback in every one-on-one, always using a structured approach to keep it clear, fair, and actionable.
- **The “why”:** Regularly reinforce the why of the work by grounding in:
- **Impact:** How does this team or project save the business money, make money, or reduce risk? What difference are we making?
 - **Purpose:** Why does this matter beyond the numbers—what problem does it solve, and for whom?
 - **Connection:** How does each person's role link to the bigger picture and to one another? How does the individual or team's work serve the impact and purpose?

Peers' Neuroinclusive Teamwork Playbook

While HR creates the infrastructure and leaders set the tone, it is colleagues' moment-to-moment interactions that determine whether individual differences remain barriers for a team or become its greatest strengths. Neuroinclusion at the peer level isn't about promoting special treatment; it's about the benefits to everyone of genuine relationships, articulated expectations and working styles, and clear recognition of the many ways colleagues contribute value. This playbook zeroes in on three levers for peers and allies to pull: **connect** with others through openness and curiosity; **signal** communication and work style differences; and **recognize** contributions and strengths.

Connect: Working relationships built on trust

When concepts of "normal" personality and behavior are applied narrowly and judgments are made hastily, neurodiverse teams can break down before any trust can be built. Conversely, when ideas of what's "normal" expand and curiosity outweighs judgment, neurodiverse teams can tap into one another's unique perspectives and build lasting, authentic, trusting workplace relationships. Colleagues can accomplish this through:

- **Openness:** Trust begins with an open mindset. Approaching colleagues without assumptions or rigid expectations creates space for authentic connections and reduces the risk of bias.
 - Approach new relationships with openness, not judgment. Enter interactions with colleagues by asking yourself, "*What can I learn about how this person works and thinks?*" rather than rushing to categorize or dismiss.
 - Be curious. When someone's approach, style, or tone doesn't make sense to you, lean in further, give the benefit of the doubt, and ask clarifying questions to get on the same page.

- **Patience:** Building trust takes time. Giving relationships room to grow prevents snap judgments and allows people's real strengths and character to emerge.
 - Give three impressions before drawing conclusions. Instead of relying on a single first impression, interact at least three times before assuming you understand someone's style, skills, or reliability.
 - Pause. Resist the urge to fill the silence and give time for mental gears to turn. Some people may need to repeat what you said out loud or in their head in order to process it; others may need a moment to distill complex thoughts or ideas into words. When you jump in to end uncomfortable silences, you could also be ending a valuable train of thought.
 - Allow colleagues to process information and respond in a way that's optimal for them. For example, while some colleagues may come alive in a real-time brainstorm, others may come up with better ideas if they quietly listen and then send their ideas later in a written follow-up.
- **Substantive collaboration:** Trust deepens when colleagues recognize and rely on the value of each other's contributions. Focusing on substance ensures people are judged on their work and ideas, not surface-level cues.
 - Prioritize substance over style. Focus on the content of colleagues' contributions (what they are saying or creating) rather than their tone of delivery. This reduces misinterpretations and helps you notice value you might otherwise overlook.
 - Invite feedback and offer it in return. Ask colleagues questions like, *"Did I sound confident in that meeting?"* or *"Did I answer that question clearly?"* Offer to provide reciprocal feedback on their communication so growth is mutual and trust deepens.

Signal: Communication preferences and working styles

Misunderstandings often come from mismatched assumptions about how people prefer to communicate and collaborate, and the intended meaning behind different phrases and constructions. Teams can reduce friction and

build trust by making these natural differences visible and easy to reference so colleagues don't have to guess or rely on trial and error. This can be accomplished through:

- **Statuses and signatures:** Small, visible, easy-to-understand cues make communication smoother by setting expectations up front. They help colleagues and partners quickly understand how best to approach you and interpret you, which reduces friction and misinterpretation.
 - Add short cues like *"Direct Communicator"* or *"Relationship-First Communicator"* to your email signatures or Slack/Teams status. You can also adopt a color-coded shorthand for communication styles. See the chart on page 65 for signal and status options you can bring back to your team.
 - Give clients and cross-functional partners brief primers on the different styles represented on your team and the meaning behind the changes to your statuses and signatures.
- **Personal User Manuals:** Instead of relying on assumptions and biases, colleagues can explicitly share and hear how others work best. User manuals create transparency, reduce miscommunication, allow authenticity, and speed up collaboration.
 - Document how you communicate, receive feedback, do your best work, and more using a simple Personal User Manual structure like the one outlined on page 64.
 - Whenever a new colleague joins the team, take the time for a live meeting to reshare your manuals and refresh the whole team.
 - Share your full or abbreviated Personal User Manual with cross-functional partners and clients where possible, and normalize being outspoken about your unique style and needs in the workplace.

Recognize: Strengths and contributions

Recognition and reinforcement are just as necessary from colleagues as they are from managers and leaders. Elevating awareness of colleagues' strengths and contributions enables managers to more effectively take a strengths-based approach, and enables team members to better support one another's work. This can be accomplished by:

■ **Vocalizing colleagues' unique strengths and contributions:**

Recognition is most impactful when it highlights what each person does distinctively well. Calling out these strengths not only boosts morale but also encourages people to apply them more often.

- When you notice a peer excel—whether in analytical problem-solving, creative storytelling, or keeping the team calm under stress—say it out loud. Be specific: *"You pulled out the core message of that presentation in a way that made it land so clearly."* Then encourage greater use of that strength: *"We could use your skill in synthesis—could you help us shape the next proposal?"*
- Express gratitude for visible outputs like reports, presentations, and solutions, and for less-visible support, like thoughtful feedback, connecting two people at the right moment, and providing historical context that saves the team time.

■ **Surfacing invisible work:** Much of the labor that gives high-performing teams their unique edge is easy to overlook. Recognizing behind-the-scenes efforts ensures that those contributions are valued and helps prevent burnout—or turnover—due to unacknowledged effort.

- Pay attention to detail-oriented or behind-the-scenes labor that often goes unacknowledged, such as:
 - » **Process creation and enforcement:** Drafting checklists, documenting workflows, or maintaining systems others rely on.
 - » **Quality assurance:** Catching errors before they reach clients, maintaining high standards by reviewing work closely.

- » **Cross-stream synergies:** Increasing work scope gradually over time to absorb overlapping workstreams.
- » **Safety-net roles:** Stepping in quietly when someone drops a ball, ensuring continuity without needing credit.
- When you see these efforts, point them out in front of the team or to a manager so their value is recognized.
- **Providing public recognition:** Sharing appreciation openly reinforces positive behaviors and normalizes a culture of acknowledgment where contributions—both big and small—are less likely to be missed.
 - Acknowledge colleagues' impact during team meetings, in written updates, or on shared channels while keeping in mind how they prefer to be recognized. Public appreciation normalizes recognition and builds a culture where contributions don't go unnoticed.
 - Consider using one or more of the following recognition prompts as a regular part of team retrospectives and all-hands meetings:
 - » Who kept something running smoothly behind the scenes?
 - » Who stepped in when a ball got dropped?
 - » Who helped keep things calm when the pressure was high?
 - » Whose thinking shaped the outcome—even if their name isn't on the final product?
 - » What contribution surprised or impressed you this week?
 - » What's one quiet win we haven't acknowledged yet?
 - » *Facilitator tip: Give people a few minutes to reflect before sharing. Let people submit anonymously if preferred.*

Conclusion:

A neuroinclusive future

Neuroinclusion cannot be reduced to discrete accommodations or goodwill gestures. It requires a broader transformation in which workplaces are designed to flex, adapt, and expand in order to encompass the full range of human talent they contain. Rather than trying to retrofit individuals into rigid systems, organizations must evolve their systems to unlock talent at the edges, where it too often goes unseen and underleveraged.

We have shown how misperceptions about neurodivergent professionals block companies from considerable benefits that directly impact their bottom lines. When colleagues mistake directness for rudeness, equate masking with professionalism, or see differences as deficiencies, talent is not only overlooked but actively constrained. At the same time, when workplaces presume capability, measure what matters, default to flexibility, design for edge cases, and ensure adaptive systems, neurodivergent professionals can demonstrate the skills that are urgently needed in a world of technological disruption and uncertainty.

The **Neuroinclusion Operating System** for HR, leaders, and teammates outlines how this transformation can take root in practice:

- HR can **build, measure, and equip** by embedding flexible systems, transparent advancement pathways, skill-centered hiring practices, and specialized resources.
- Leaders can **enable, harness, and clarify** by building flexibility into workflows, focusing on strengths, and grounding communication in purpose.
- Peers can **connect, signal, and recognize** by fostering openness, articulating work styles and preferences, and ensuring contributions and strengths are visible.

Together, these practices begin to reconfigure workplace culture from one of narrow conformity to one of dynamic responsiveness, where every unique profile finds the conditions to thrive.

While the qualitative insights and lived experiences collected here make the case for action, the next frontier is quantitative validation. This field urgently needs robust, intersectional research to measure the outcomes of neuroinclusive practices and expanded ways of working: What is the impact on retention, innovation, risk management, or financial performance? How do the proactive shifts we propose compare to reactive accommodations? What measurable advantages accrue to organizations that expand their talent frame, and how can these be scaled equitably?

Our call is, therefore, twofold:

- 1 For **organizations**, to experiment with our approach to neuroinclusion, treating it not as a compliance obligation or charity endeavor, but as a lever of competitive advantage.
- 2 For **researchers and practitioners**, to generate the data and case studies that will validate, refine, and expand these approaches, ensuring they are durable, evidence-based, and broadly adopted.

The question is no longer whether neurodivergent professionals have the ability to succeed. The evidence is clear that they can, and do. The real question is how much talent—and how much future advantage—is lost when organizations fail to embrace this dynamic talent pool. Organizations that design for the full spectrum of human potential will not only thrive in the present but also shape the resilient, innovative future of work.

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