

LEAVING COVID BEHIND - PUTTING NEUROINCLUSION AHEAD

Our COVID-19 working experience has helped us recognise that there is more than one way to get things done. Successful inclusion of our neurodivergent colleagues requires a similar approach. There can never be a one size fits all, especially not when wanting to access the abilities and skills of brains that think differently.

As firms are preparing for a return to the office, we have collated feedback from the neurodiverse community on the opportunities our COVID experience created for them and how they would suggest the 'new normal' to look like.

1. Workplace

Many neurodivergent colleagues benefited from being able to tailor the home office set-up to their needs. These are their recommendations for a more neuroinclusive office environment:

- Provide access to quiet rooms / quiet zones to limit distractions. Many neurodivergent brains benefit from 'hyperfocus', the ability to deeply concentrate for long time periods. To allow them to make full use of this skill, try and limit distractions/interruptions at their desk. Providing the option to withdraw to quiet areas on short notice will ensure maximum benefit.
- Hot desking is a challenge for neurodivergent colleagues who experience sensory overload. Allocating assigned desks in an appropriate location (e.g. away from foot traffic, away from smells, near natural light, without back to others) will reduce sensory overload and enable neurodivergent brains to make use of their amazing skills rather than wasting time and energy on managing anxiety.
- For the same reason, allow the use of headphones to block out noise.

2. Work hours

Being better able to structure the workday to their needs suited many neurodivergent colleagues. Here's their feedback on how to carry over this flexibility into the post-COVID work environment:

- The ability to hyperfocus is considered a key advantage by many neurodivergent individuals. It enables them to work very efficiently and quickly produce results. When working from home, they considered it a benefit that it was impossible for colleagues to suddenly show up at their desk and distract them. Back in the office, asking colleagues to send a quick email and arrange a convenient time to chat, "could I come over in 30 mins for a quick question?" can make a huge difference for neurodivergent colleagues as it causes less disruption to their hyperfocus flow.
- Operating at the high intensity and speed of hyperfocus is of course not possible the whole day. Neurodivergent colleagues found that while they were often judged for taking breaks or logging off early when in the office, working from home allowed them to take control of their day. It would be beneficial to retain this flexibility.
- Another advantage when working from home was the ability to use read aloud apps. Many neurodivergent brains prefer an active approach to acquiring information. For reading assignments or quiet work (e.g. online training courses), being able to leave the office on short notice to perform these activities from home can increase efficiency.
- More flexible working hours would also allow those neurodivergent colleagues that are overwhelmed by commuting in rush hour to work different hours, or from home.

3. Meetings

Larger meetings are a massive source of anxiety for many neurodivergent colleagues. From the feedback we have received from the neurodiverse community, it seems that meetings are the occasion in our work lives where different needs are least considered. These are the suggestions for a more inclusive meeting culture in the post-COVID world:

- Neurodivergent brains often prefer 1:1 meetings to group activities. When attending larger virtual meetings, many found that they provided helpful structure and allowed for a better organised approach. For example, the use of the 'Raise Hand' function helped colleagues to contribute to group conversations. After our return to the office, interaction in physical meetings could be improved by the meeting chair inviting people to speak. This should enable a more balanced discussion.
- Offering the opportunity to contribute to group discussion in different ways improves neuroinclusion. Many neurodivergent colleagues prefer to reflect on different points of view before forming an opinion. Being able to provide feedback by email after a meeting and giving these written contributions the same weight and consideration as those aired during the meeting ensures that their voices are heard.
- Many neurodivergent individuals are creative thinkers. Being able to think out of the box is a huge advantage, but can also result in them proposing actions which are out of scope of the meeting or project. Many neurodivergent colleagues feel that on such occasions 'looks' are directed at them. It helps for all of us to recognise that creative thinking is a sought-after skill and hardly ever a disadvantage.
- Lastly, to ensure focus is retained during meetings, an agenda and a clear objective are beneficial for neurodivergent individuals - although this is beneficial to all!

Conclusion

Successful neuroinclusion can be straightforward. Most of the above suggestions can be easily implemented. It is important to note though that the requirements go a little beyond the standard flexibilities. Neurodivergent individuals should be able to decide what makes the most sense for them, also on short notice. However, many feel that this is not the case at the moment, at least not to a sufficient extent. For example, getting every team member to work from home on a fixed day every week does not fall within this definition of flexibility.

The main ask from the neurodivergent community is for firms, HR and managers to stop imposing 'normal' and acknowledge that everyone is different and will have different needs, so it can never be 'one size fits all'. Not having the same expectations to everyone and being non-judgemental makes the difference.

A healthy attitude for organisations to adopt is to not assess people by HOW they get the job done, how they interact with other, etc, but by WHAT they deliver. To harness the benefits of neurodiversity, it is key to adopt a result-oriented approach rather than a process-focused approach.

To find out more about neuroinclusion, please go to:
www.diversityproject.com/neurodiversity

If you have further questions, would like to become a neurodiverse role model or have examples you'd like to add to the paper, please get in touch:
info@diversityproject.com