Neurodiversity in the Workplace

A Toolkit for Employers, Leaders, & Colleagues

Western

WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?[1]

Simply put, neurodiversity refers to differences in the way people's brains work.

These differences affect how individuals interpret and interact with the world and have a significant impact on thinking, learning, emotional regulation, and behaviour.

In contrast, neurotypical people think, behave, and experience the world in ways that have historically been considered standard, correct, and consistent with societal norms.

Some neuro-differences have been associated with specific medical diagnoses or learning disabilities. Each of these neurodevelopmental conditions, present since birth, results in varying degrees of functional impact.

While neurodiversity is often considered a disability, symptoms vary depending on the individual and their unique circumstances, and not everyone will need the same type of treatment or support. The estimated worldwide prevalence of neurodiversity is ~20%, suggesting that these differences may be normal human variations rather that obscure deficits.

CONDITIONS ASSOCIATED WITH NEURODIVERSITY

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)[2]

A developmental disorder characterized by challenges with social communication, repetitive behaviours, altered sensitivity to stimuli (like sound/touch), and restricted interests, causing variable degrees of functional impairment

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)[3]

A congenital condition characterized by patterns of inattention and/or hyperactivity & impulsivity that interferes with functioning across a variety of settings

Dyslexia[4]

A learning disorder characterized by difficulty identifying speech sounds and decoding/recognizing words, affecting the ease with which a person reads, writes, and spells

Dysgraphia[5]

A learning disorder characterized by impaired written expression, including difficulty with fine motor skills, resulting in distorted handwriting as well as difficulty with spelling/grammar and translating ideas into written words

Dyscalculia[6]

A developmental disorder characterized by difficulty understanding number-related concepts and performing mathematical calculations

Dyspraxia[7]

A developmental coordination disorder characterized by difficulty planning and processing fine & gross motor tasks, affecting movement, coordination, language, and memory.

Synesthesia[8]

A perceptual phenomenon in which stimulation of one sensory or cognitive pathway leads to sensation in a different sensory modality (ie. hearing colours, feeling sounds, or tasting shapes)

Tourette Syndrome (And Tic Disorders)[9]

A neurological disorder characterized by sudden involuntary body movements (twitches) and compulsive vocalizations (grunting, rarely obscenities) that occur repeatedly

Some broader definitions of neurodiversity may include the following conditions, some of which are acquired over time and have waxing & waning symptoms:

- **Psychiatric:** Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, Anxiety, Bipolar Disorder, Depression, Personality Disorders
- **Trauma**
- **Developmental:** Intellectual Disabilities, Developmental Language Disorder, Developmental Coordination Disorders, Down Syndrome, Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, Giftedness
- **Neurological:** Sensory Integration Disorder, Auditory Processing Disorder, Irlen Syndrome, Cerebral Palsy, Apraxia, Parkinson's Disease, Multiple Sclerosis, Epilepsy and Seizure Disorders, Agenesis or Dysgenesis of the Corpus Callosum, Dementia

Genius within[10]
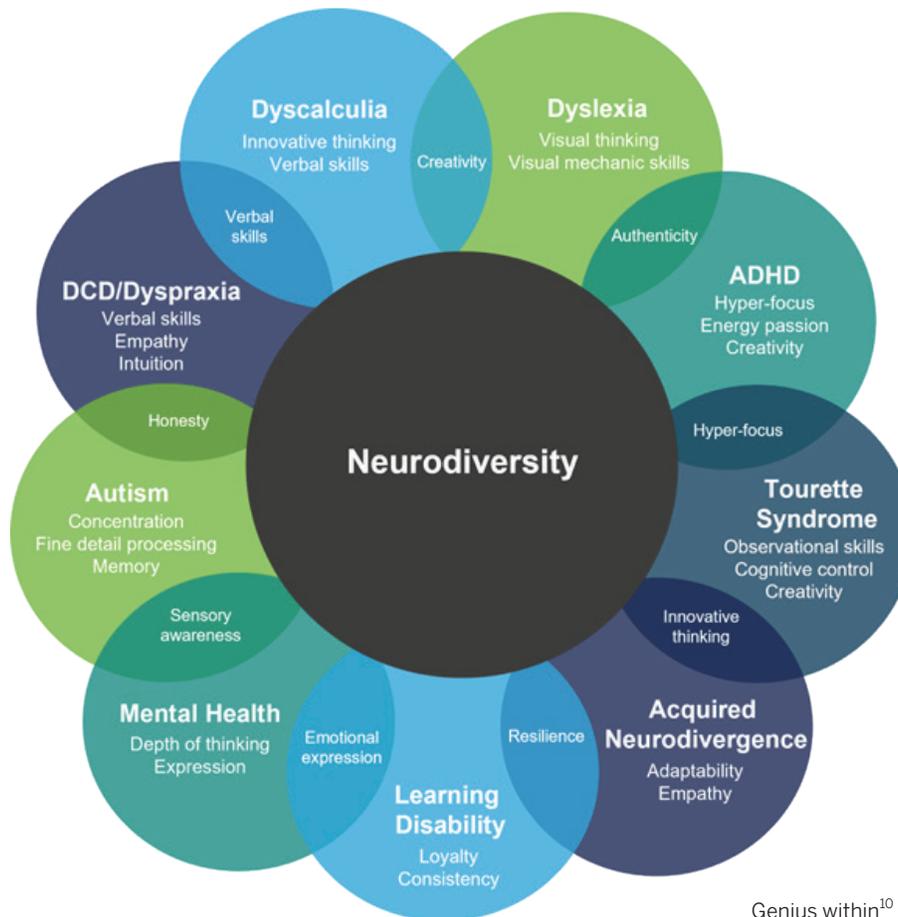
Attributes of neurodiverse employees may include the following:

Strengths

- Authenticity
- Creativity
- Storytelling
- Curiosity
- Empathy
- Fearlessness/courage
- Passion
- Attention to detail
- Quick thinking
- Pattern recognition
- Problem-solving
- Hyper-focus
- Memory*
- Specialty skills (computation, reading, music, drawing)*
- Entrepreneurialism
- Visuo-spatial skills
- Practicality
- Verbal communication*

Challenges

- Coping with change
- Interpreting abstract ideas
- Stilted/scripted speech
- Poor eye contact
- Sensory stimulation
- Staying organized
- Managing time
- Sustaining focus
- Meeting deadlines
- Memory*
- Excessive movement/fidgeting
- Excessive talking
- Impulsivity
- Mathematical calculations*
- Reading*
- Written/verbal communication*
- Feelings of underachievement/shame

*Some attributes may be strengths for one person and challenges for another, highlighting the many unique presentations of neurodiversity!

IN THE WORKPLACE

Neurodiverse people may struggle at one or more stages of the employment process.
For example:

- **Interview** – *difficulty maintaining eye contact*
- **Getting to know colleagues** – *differences in interpreting and responding to social cues*
- **Communication (written & verbal)** – *variable speed/accuracy/comfort*
- **Meeting deadlines** – *struggling with distractions and time management*
- **Working on a team** – *feeling overstimulated and overwhelmed*

How do leaders and colleagues identify challenges in the workplace?

- Performance issues (poor quality work, overdue tasks, lack of engagement, difficulty asking for help)
- Attendance problems (late arrival at work or back to work after a break)
- Isolation (few friends, limited social engagement)
- Witnessed behaviours (self-soothing, self-stimulating, repetitive actions, self-harm, interrupting others)
- Stigmatization by colleagues (negative impressions, frustration, gossip)
- Self-identification by an employee seeking support

While fitting into a workplace setting may appear too challenging at first glance, careful consideration of workplace design and the presence of appropriate supports can offer neurodiverse folks tremendous opportunities for professional success, and even a competitive advantage! The caveat is that the right supports MUST be in place to enable the thriving of neurodiverse people in the workplace.

How do teams integrate and support neurodiverse employees?

Effective supports for neurodiverse employees can range from awareness and education through to workspace modifications and flexible deadlines. Individual needs will vary, but all workplace leaders should have a good understanding of the potential needs of neurodiverse employees.

Leaders at the forefront of thriving workforces value and leverage neurodifferences within their teams. They thoughtfully match jobs to their employees' competencies, and they create physical and psychological spaces suffused with a culture of safety, respect, equity, and trust.

It is important for neurotypical colleagues to be allies to neurodiverse team members. Voicing support for inclusive workplace practices and design, along with demonstrating flexibility in working with colleagues in different ways, enhances team morale and helps to set everyone up for professional success.

DESIGN > BEFORE > ACCOMMODATION

Many workplaces are currently designed in ways that favour neurotypical employees and exacerbate functional limitations of neurodiverse employees. This can result in neurodiverse workers experiencing disability. It is critical that organizations take the opportunity to structure their work environments in ways that, by default, support neurodiverse individuals and harness their skills and strengths. This is not a single person's responsibility but a shared responsibility. Leadership should be proactive in communicating with employees about what they need to be successful in their work environments. If a workspace is not optimally designed to support a neurodiverse employee, accommodations should be explored and are often possible.

Workplace supports can take the form of Universal Design and/or specific Accommodations.

What do UNIVERSAL DESIGN strategies look like?

- **Role modeling by the leader**
  - Learn about neurodiversity and how it can impact people at work
  - Advertise positions and subsequently hire employees based on competency rather than interpersonal dynamics
  - Use inclusive language at meetings and for all interactions
  - Acknowledge visual vs. auditory learning styles and adapt presentations, work materials, and work duties accordingly (ie. give instructions in writing, use closed captioning, transcriptions, or video/audio recording for meetings, share slides from presentations in advance, offer a private workspace to allow for a verbal component to task completion, assign hands-on tasks vs. desk work)
  - Social inclusion of all team members (ie. wear name tags at meetings, bring everyone into casual conversations, invite team members to give feedback one-on-one or in writing if they are not

comfortable speaking up in a group, invite team members to office social gatherings but keep attendance optional)
- Ask for help when needed and demonstrate how/who to ask (ie. request assistance with accommodative/inclusive technology)
- Promote a culture of collaboration to ensure that team members feel comfortable working with others to complete tasks that my require strengths and input from different colleagues

- **Setting boundaries**
  - Adhere to contracted work hours and discourage overtime unless necessary
  - Create routine where regular duties or interactions are required
  - Give sufficient lead time and direction about deadlines and set a schedule of reminders or periodic check-ins to support the progress of the work
  - Lay out clear timelines for new/changing duties or projects and revisit these with individuals/team

- **Defining expectations in the workplace**
  - Establish rules of respect or a code of conduct that is reviewed with team members regularly (and have defined consequences of non-adherence)

- **Offering supports to everyone on the team (before the wheels fall off)**
  - Invite team members to speak with you pre-emptively about what supports and strategies work for them
  - Provide workplace and community resources for physical and mental health support (ie. building maps with quiet workspaces identified, Employee Assistance Program, local gym membership, biking/hiking trail maps)
  - Connect team members with IT professionals who can provide assistive technology training and access
  - Leverage artificial intelligence (AI) technology for work task completion (ie. use ChatGPT to assist in professional letter-writing or document preparation)
  - Redesign work spaces with room dividers for more privacy

- **Genuine, authentic check-ins between leader and employee**
  - Be reassuring, patient, and calm
  - Establish trust by having your colleague's back, following through on tasks that you've committed to, asking kind & professional questions, using clear communication

- **Highlighting and building on individual skills/successes**
  - Ask about interests & skill set, then combine these into work opportunities
  - Celebrate individual/group successes as a team

- **Flexibility in how/when/where some work gets done**
  - Stagger deadlines
  - Assign group work or share job tasks
  - Relocate employees to workspaces that are quieter or that have more natural light

- **Coaching**
  - Offer mentorship matching for new employees
  - Participate in conversation coaching for leaders (ie. Western's Excellence in Leadership Workshop on Challenging Conversations)

What do ACCOMMODATIONS look like?

- **Instructions/schedules in writing, by video, or by audio file**

- **Task lists with clearly identified priorities**

- **Extra time for feedback with supervisor in a private setting**

- **Assistive technology**
  - Dual monitors
  - Screen masking
  - Voice-to-text/Text-to-voice software
  - Smart calendars
  - Grammarly for tone
  - Artificial Intelligence (AI) programs for writing assistance
  - Pencil grips, paper with raised lines
  - Hearing aids, microphone
  - Closed captioning or image descriptions

- **Desk timer or phone/watch to cue task changes**

- **Private/quiet workspace**
  - "Privacy" sign on office door

- **Extra time to respond to emails or complete tasks**
  - Allow employees to work at their own pace
  - Explicit timelines in writing

- **Sensory deprivation**
  - Noise-cancelling headphones
  - Noise-reducing earbuds (ie. Loop or Flare brands)
  - Low-lighting or darkness (ie. sunglasses, LED vs fluorescent vs incandescent lighting with dimmer)
  - Reduce pitch and/or volume of telephone ring tones

- Enforce fragrance-free policies

- **Sensory stimulation**
  - Fidget gadgets (ideally silent devices to prevent distracting others)
  - Weighted vest
  - Stuffed animal
  - Heated "rice bag" or electric heating pad
  - Personal fan
  - Listening to music/podcast while working
  - Body movement (ie. rocking, bouncing the leg, tapping fingers, alternative seating instead of a traditional chair, height-adjustable workstation, step peddler under the desk)

- **Virtual/Zoom meetings vs. in-person**
  - Smaller meeting sizes
  - Walking meetings

- **Flexibility with work**
  - Allow phone calls to go to voicemail and return the call (or send an email reply) after planning a response
  - Variable start/end times
  - Additional breaks worked into the day (ie. movement breaks)
  - Alternative work locations (ie. quiet space with natural light)

- **Coaching**
  - Assists with executive functioning and communication
  - Provides psychological support

- **Mediation**
  - Reduces interpersonal difficulties between colleagues

SELF-ADVOCACY

If you think that you may be neurodiverse and want to pursue a diagnosis, please speak with your primary care provider.

Confidential support can be accessed through the **Employee Well-being Team** where only limitations and restrictions are communicated to your supervisor. This information facilitates a discussion about design changes and accommodation options that can be undertaken with a focus on improving function in the workplace

CAMPUS RESOURCES

Contact Western's Employee Well-being Team at employee.wellbeing@uwo.ca for more helpful resources to support you and your employee(s).

Library Accessibility
Alternate print formatting, quiet study/workspaces
Email: libraryaccessibility@uwo.ca

Office of Equity, Diversity, & Inclusion
Information, programming, & advocacy
Email: edi@uwo.ca
Western Student Services Building – Room 2120

Human Rights Office
Advice & guidance on Western's Non-Discrimination & Harassment Policy
Phone: 519-661-2111 x83334.
Email: humanrights@uwo.ca
Sommerville House – Room 2319

Employee Well-being Office
Support and assistance in identifying & accessing workplace resources for wellness
Email: employee.wellbeing@uwo.ca
Support Services Building – Room 4159

Workplace Health Office
Occupational health nurse & physician
Phone: 519-661-2111 ext. 85472
Support Services Building – Room 4159

Digital Accessibility Features
in frequently used software for Western Faculty, Staff and Students
accessibility.uwo.ca/resources/digital_accessibility

COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Autism & Neurodiversity in the Workplace
An online, asynchronous, free course offered through the University of British Columbia:
circa.educ.ubc.ca/autism-in-the-workplace/

ADHD in the Workplace
An online webinar offered through the Centre for ADHD Awareness Canada
caddac.ca/programs-events/adhd-in-the-workplace/

Autism Nova Scotia
Videos and learning modules about autism and neurodiversity in the workplace
campus.autismnovascotia.ca/

References:

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