



NEURODIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE

We are not all born equal – we are surrounded by people with invisible powers, says obo's Gary Helm. Here is his take on Neurodiversity which introduces this month's Roundtable focused on designing for mental wellbeing

Around 10% percent of the UK population is said to be neurodiverse. This term refers to people with genetic differences such as Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, ADHD, Tourettes and various forms of Autism, such as Aspergers.

People who are neurodiverse are wired differently, and often their differences are an extraordinary strength in the workplace.

For instance, Dyslexia and Autism are associated with advanced memory, mathematical and pattern recognition skills. A skillset that would get you very far in, say, economics. And entrepreneurs are very often dyslexic – one of the most famous examples is Richard Branson, who said in an interview in *The Independent* ...'(after school) my dyslexia became my massive advantage: it helped me to think creatively and laterally, and see solutions where others saw problems.'

But in a poll by CIPD only one in 10 say that consideration of neurodivergent people is included in their management strategies. It follows then that consideration in the interior design and spatial design of a workplace is not a priority. But creating solutions to allow neurodivergent people to flourish at work can be simple and affordable. For instance, software that can convert text to speech, or speech to text, allows dyslexics to get on with their meaningful work without losing time to frustrating battles with spelling and concentration. And dual-screens totally eradicate issues with memory.

But what of the physical design of a workplace? Can those of us responsible for the space planning,

the interior design and the furniture specification create spaces in which a neurodivergent person can excel, without sacrificing aesthetic design and inflating design budgets?

The answer is yes – and designing spaces inclusive of people on as many spectrums as possible will inevitably benefit us all: largely, the key is to make spaces that are calming. Creating places to work where noise need not be a distraction, where colour is used to calm, where lighting supports rather than challenges the senses. Who doesn't want to work in an environment that incorporates all of these things?

Acoustics are easily dealt with through the specification of products that are designed to absorb and interrupt the soundwaves travelling through a space. The array of products now available range from high-back sofas and breakout seating for making quiet phone calls, through to tables for informal, private meetings.

Adjustable or movable desk dividers, upholstered in fabric, double up as acoustic baffling and also provide much needed privacy for those who struggle with concentration.

Storage is incredibly important to some neurodivergent people, who need the security and order that good storage provides to feel safe and stress-free. Under-desk storage is good, but moveable and lockable storage is great if the workplace is open plan and non-territorial.

Using low-arousal colours on walls and furnishings, and avoiding pattern can help mitigate stress. Alison Standish, founder of colour experts The Colour Ministry, recommends calming tones of cream and avoiding mixing colours. 'Giving consideration to colour is more than thinking about aesthetics. Colour has psychological and emotional impact. For many people a mix of complementary colours creates a soothing and comforting environment, but, for neurodiverse people, avoiding pattern and choosing a flat colour is the best choice for concentration and to avoid triggering anxieties,' she says.

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When it comes to lighting, it's about managing glare and flickering. So avoiding fluorescent lighting and poor-quality LED is essential. 'Investing in the correct lighting design for any space is wise,' says David Clements, CEO of architectural lighting experts FUTURE Designs. 'People perform at their best when you give them the healthiest environment and what we can achieve with the latest LED technology is as close to perfection as we've ever been. We can create lighting landscapes that support neurodivergency in its many forms, and the running costs are so much lower than old fluorescent technology. It's a win/win.'

Additional considerations could be given, of course. People who are neurodivergent often need routine and structure. Spatial layouts can help here – having zones with territorial desking, for instance. And as stretching helps those with Tourettes or Autism improve focus, a designated quiet area for this could be beneficial (stretching is also shown to help improve focus in people generally as well, so another win/win).

There are many platforms providing practical advice for designing inclusive spaces. The National Autistic Society [<https://www.autism.org.uk/environment>] recommends making spaces that eliminate distractions. BRE Group (responsible for BREEAM certifications) highlights the issues caused by some fluorescent and LED lighting to those with Autism. And CIPD has created a comprehensive guide to neurodiversity and the workplace. ♦

