

Building Better Workplaces for Neurodivergent Employees

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The landscape of work is undergoing a radical transformation, with flexible arrangements and remote working becoming increasingly embedded in organisational culture. However, for the estimated 15-20% of people who are neurodivergent – including those with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and other cognitive differences – navigating the workplace can present unique and sometimes overwhelming challenges. Researchers at the University of Bath have conducted the largest UK study of its kind, exploring how flexible working practices can support neurodivergent employees in the workplace, revealing both challenges and opportunities for creating more inclusive work environments.

The Modern Workplace Challenge

While recent years have seen growing awareness of neurodiversity in the workplace, significant barriers to employment and career progression remain. Now, groundbreaking research from the University of Bath is shedding new light on how workplace practices can better support neurodivergent employees while highlighting the urgent need for organisational change.

The [Centre for People Led Digitalisation](#) brought together an interdisciplinary University of Bath team, including members from the School of Management, Department of Psychology ([Centre for Applied Autism Research](#)), Department of Mechanical Engineering, and Institute for Policy Research to conduct the most comprehensive UK study to date examining employment outcomes for neurodivergent individuals. Their research, which analysed data from over 25,000 people through the UK Labour Force Survey, has revealed significant disparities between neurodivergent and neurotypical workers – but also identified promising solutions that could help create more inclusive workplaces.

Understanding the Employment Gap

The research team's analysis revealed stark differences in employment outcomes between neurodivergent and neurotypical individuals. The research found that neurodivergent people are twice as likely to be in precarious employment and more than ten times as likely to be in temporary positions compared to their neurotypical colleagues. These statistics paint a concerning picture of workplace instability for neurodivergent individuals.

Beyond these topline findings, the research uncovered multiple layers of employment challenges. Neurodivergent individuals

often experience higher rates of underemployment, meaning they frequently work fewer hours than they would like or in roles that do not fully utilise their skills and capabilities. Neurodivergent individuals also tend to have shorter job tenure, suggesting difficulties in maintaining long-term employment stability.

However, one of the study's most intriguing findings was that when controlling for other factors (e.g., individual characteristics like education, age, and gender, and job characteristics such as industry sector and type of work undertaken), there were no significant differences in hourly wages between neurodivergent and neurotypical employees in similar roles. This suggests that the primary challenges lie not in direct wage discrimination but in accessing and maintaining stable, long-term employment opportunities that match individuals' skills and capabilities.

The Power of Workplace Flexibility

Perhaps the most significant contribution of the research lies in its examination of how flexible working arrangements can impact employment outcomes for neurodivergent individuals. The research examined various types of workplace flexibility, including adjusted working hours and remote working options. The findings showed that around a quarter of neurodivergent employees currently have access to some form of flexible working arrangement. However, this rate is actually slightly lower than for neurotypical workers, suggesting that organisations are not yet fully leveraging these practices as tools for supporting neurodivergent staff.

The impact of flexibility proved particularly significant for certain aspects of employment. Flexible working arrangements were found to help reduce underemployment among neurodivergent workers and increase job tenure, especially for those who are



autistic. This suggests that giving neurodivergent employees greater control over when and where they work can help create conditions more conducive to long-term employment success.

Tailoring Support to Individual Needs

One of the study's most nuanced findings was that different types of neurodivergence may benefit from different forms of workplace flexibility. While opportunities to work from home tended to improve employment outcomes for all neurodivergent employees, flexible working arrangements such as flexitime arrangements that enable employees to work flexibly around school terms particularly benefited autistic employees but not those with other neurodivergent conditions.

This variety in preferences and outcomes emphasises the importance of avoiding a one-size-fits-all approach to workplace support. Instead, organisations need to develop flexible frameworks that can accommodate individual differences while ensuring their practices do not inadvertently create new barriers or challenges.

The Role of Remote Work

The research paid particular attention to the impact of remote working arrangements, which have become increasingly prevalent since the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings suggest that home working can be particularly beneficial for some neurodivergent employees, offering them greater control over their sensory environment and reducing the social demands of office-based work.

However, the researchers also found that the effectiveness of remote working varied among different neurodivergent conditions. For some individuals, remote work helped reduce underemployment and improve job satisfaction, while others benefited more from hybrid arrangements that combined home and office-based work. This variability again underscores the importance of flexible, individualised approaches to workplace accommodation.

The Business Case for Inclusion

With improvements in diagnostic approaches and growing awareness of neurodiversity, the proportion of the workforce identifying as neurodivergent is expected to increase significantly over the next two decades. This shift makes it increasingly crucial for organisations to develop effective support strategies now. The research team suggests that organisations should focus on creating flexible frameworks that can accommodate different needs while ensuring their practices are sustainable and scalable.

While the research primarily focuses on employment outcomes, it also highlights the potential business benefits of creating more inclusive workplaces. The study notes that neurodivergent employees often bring unique skills and perspectives to their roles, including strong attention to detail, creative problem-solving abilities, and different ways of thinking about challenges. However, these potential benefits can only be realised if organisations create environments where neurodivergent employees can truly thrive. This requires moving beyond simple compliance with equality legislation to actively embracing neurodiversity as a source of organisational strength.

Current Challenges and Future Directions

The research team is now working on developing more detailed guidance for employers and policymakers while continuing to study how different workplace practices affect various neurodivergent conditions. They are particularly interested in understanding how organisations can better support neurodivergent employees through periods of workplace change and how different sectors might need to adapt their approaches. One key area of focus is the role of digital technologies in supporting neurodivergent employees. While digital tools can offer new opportunities for workplace flexibility and accommodation, they can also create new challenges that need to be carefully considered and addressed.



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Practical Implications for Organisations

The research offers several key insights for organisations looking to improve their support for neurodivergent employees. First, flexible working arrangements should be seen as a fundamental tool for creating inclusive workplaces, not just an optional extra. However, these arrangements need to be thoughtfully designed and implemented to ensure they meet individual needs effectively. Second, organisations need to recognise that different individuals may need different types of support, and these needs may change over time. This requires creating systems that are both flexible and responsive to individual circumstances. Third, support for neurodivergent employees should be considered at every stage of the employment relationship, from recruitment and onboarding through to career development and progression. This includes ensuring that workplace policies and practices do not inadvertently disadvantage neurodivergent individuals.

A Path Forward

The team's research represents a significant step forward in understanding how organisations can better support neurodivergent employees. While their findings highlight continuing challenges, they also point to practical solutions that could help create more inclusive workplaces. As Professor Branicki emphasises, creating truly inclusive workplaces is not just about supporting neurodivergent employees – it is about developing organisational practices that can benefit everyone. By focusing on flexibility and individual needs, and removing unnecessary barriers, organisations can create environments where all employees can contribute and succeed.

MEET THE RESEARCHER

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Professor Layla Branicki serves as Director of Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion at the University of Bath School of Management. Her research examines organisational resilience, crisis management, and corporate social responsibility across multiple levels of analysis. Professor Branicki's work focuses on how organisations can responsibly and resiliently handle complex employee health and safety issues, high-risk work settings, and societal-level crises. Her research has appeared in leading journals including *Academy of Management Discoveries*, *Academy of Management Perspectives*, and *Work, Employment and Society*, and she serves as an Associate Editor for *Group and Organization Management*. The work reported in this article was the result of an interdisciplinary collaboration between the University of Bath, School of Management (Professor Layla Branicki and Professor Stephen Brammer), and the Department of Psychology (Professor Mark Brosnan), Institute for Policy Research – Economics (Dr Aida Garcia Lazaro), and Department of Mechanical Engineering (Dr Susan Lattanzio and Professor Linda Newnes).

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FURTHER READING

LJ Branicki, S Brammer, M Brosnan, *et al.*, [Factors shaping the employment outcomes of neurodivergent and neurotypical people: Exploring the role of flexible and homeworking practices](#), *Human Resource Management*, 2024, 63(6), 1001–1023. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1002/hrm.22243>



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