Workplace inclusion:

Building the case for neurodiversity and creating inclusive experiences for all

By Martin McKay, Founder and CEO of Texthelp
and Jill Houghton, CEO & President of Disability:IN

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"The greatest resource we have is our people, and our culture starts inside by cultivating a diverse range of perspectives. We pull together around accessible belonging and work collectively to improve equity and inclusion for all."

Jill Houghton, President & Chief Executive Officer of Disability:IN

"Every workplace should welcome all employees and embrace their unique strengths and skills. Companies large and small can work towards creating an environment that suits each person's individual needs through the principles of Universal Design. Creating a workplace that is usable to the most diverse range of people ends up being beneficial to all. I encourage all employers to improve their employee experience for everyone."

Martin McKay, Founder & Chief Executive Officer of Texthelp

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Just like life outside, the workplace is a hugely diverse environment. When you think about diversity and inclusion, you might think about racial or gender representation. But what about other forms of diversity?

Neurodiversity is another form of diversity that must be considered in inclusion practices. It relates to differences in the way we think, process, learn and behave. As with our individual life experiences and personal preferences, neurodiversity also shapes how we like to work and get things done.

It's estimated that up to **20% of the global adult population is neurodivergent,** meaning they have a neurodiversity such as Dyslexia, Autism or ADHD. As many as **1 in 5 people in the workforce** may be neurodivergent, yet, just **1 in 10 organizations** say that they consider neurodiversity in their people management practices.

Neurodivergent individuals think in ways that are truly unique. They bring many advantages to any workplace, such as out-of-the-box thinking, creative solutions and more. But lack of awareness about neurodiversity and non-inclusive working environments are all barriers to success of neurodivergent employees.

Misconceptions about neurodiversity, bias, and traditional hiring practices are barriers to increasing neurodiversity in the workplace.

Schools and educators are trained to identify students with disabilities and neurodiverse conditions. They have resources in place to support them. This is not the case in the working world. Most employers are not trained in neurodiversity awareness. In fact, **research conducted by Texthelp** found that only **28% of HR professionals** are 'very confident' in identifying different types of conditions that are considered as neurodivergent. Almost **1 in 10 (9%)** are not at all confident. Neurodiversity — as with other forms of hidden diversity — often gets overlooked. This often means that neurodivergent individuals miss out on support and adjustments that allow them to work and achieve in their own way. According to **research from Disability:IN,** only **4% of employees**, and **3% of new hires**, self-identify as having a disability. Many people do not feel comfortable to approach their employer with this information. This is largely due to stigma and a fear of being treated differently.
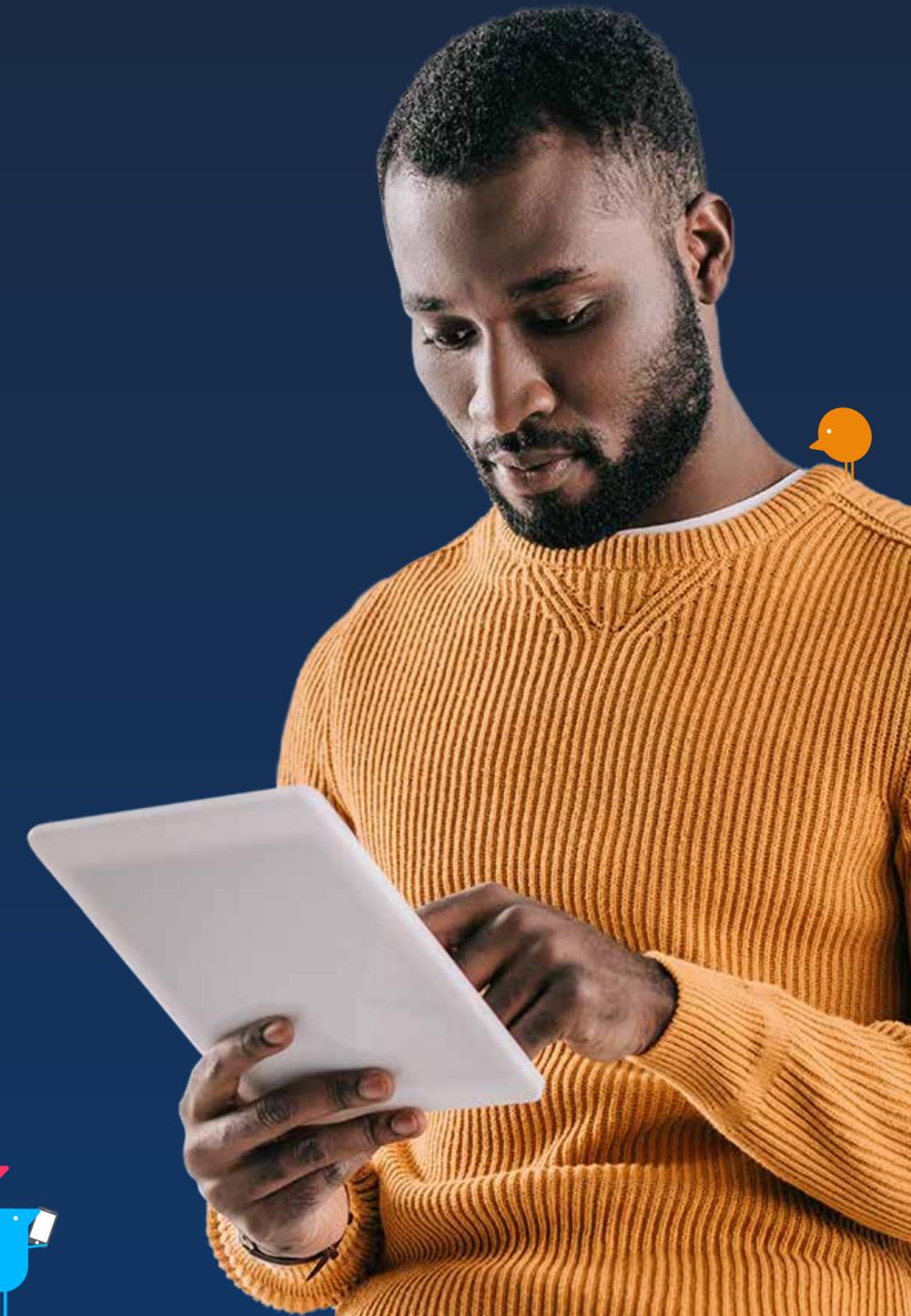
What can employers do to attract and nurture neurodiverse employees?

Organizations must create a workplace that welcomes neurodiversity, and allows employees to understand and communicate in their own way. That means adjusting the workplace to suit the needs of diverse thinkers. It also means providing tools to support different ways of working. This inclusivity should start from recruitment and onboarding, and follow through the entire employee lifecycle.

Ensuring neurodivergent employees have what they need to thrive is the right thing to do. It also benefits the organization at large. Organizations who invest in the right tools for their staff create a more productive, inclusive, and happier environment for everyone.

Invisible disabilities, unique perspectives

Neurodiversity describes natural variations in the human brain relating to how we all think, process information, learn, and behave. It is estimated that **1 in 5 people** are neurodivergent, meaning their brain functions differently than what is considered **"typical."** ADHD, Autism, Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, and Tourette's Syndrome are all examples of neurodiverse conditions. Globally, **10%** of the adult population is dyslexic, **6%** are dyspraxic, **5%** have ADHD, and **1-2%** are autistic.

Neurodivergent individuals bring many advantages to any workplace. They bring **unique perspectives** and strengthen the success of projects and tasks.
They may also need some time to adjust their work environment to suit their needs. That's because normally, working environments are set up for neurotypical ways of thinking and doing.

While every neurodivergent person is unique, some of the common challenges that these individuals may face in the workplace are identified in this table:

	Dyslexia	Dyspraxia	ADHD	Autism
Strengths	• Entrepreneurialism • Creativity and cognitive control • Visual reasoning • Practical skills, visual-spatial skills and story-telling ability	• High verbal comprehension ability • Problem solving • Empathy and people skills • Tenacity	• Creative thinking • Visual spatial reasoning ability • Hyper-focus, passion and courage	• Memory ability, and other 'specialist individual skills' including reading, drawing, music and computation • Innovative thinking and detail observation
Challenges	• Memory,organizational skills, time management, stress management, literacy • Workplace participation in terms of mental functions and social interactions • Cognitive functioning and social self-esteem	• Difficulties with driving, self-care, organization, communication and self-esteem • Processing speed and working memory • Persistence of motor difficulties	• Time management • Concentration, attention and self-regulation difficulties • Insomnia, depression, injury and absence • Maintaining employment • Difficulty with team work	• Time management • Concentration and coping with more than one task • Social and communication difficulties • Need for routine

Source: The British Psychological Society, 2017

Compounding these challenges, individuals may hide their disability from their employer. In fact, according to research from **Accenture**, 76% of employees with a disability or neurodiverse condition do not fully disclose this at work. This is largely out of fear of being made to feel different. Neurodivergent individuals often fear that "coming out" will hurt their careers due to existing stigma. This can cause more stress and prevent them from receiving the support they need to thrive and feel empowered in their job.

In the past, many employers mistook neurological differences as a sign of low intelligence, carelessness, or lack of ability. Whilst we now understand that this isn't the case, we've a long way to go to reducing the impact of negative misconceptions in the world of work.

The business case for creating a **neuroinclusive** work environment

There are many benefits of creating environments that are inclusive of neurodiversity.

1. Positive impact on business objectives

Research shows that companies with more diverse workplaces are more profitable. Leading disability -inclusive companies stand to gain as much as 28% higher revenue. Additionally, disability-inclusive companies can likely double the net income and 30% higher economic profit margins than their peers. Further, persons with disabilities also represent a significant portion of the consumer market. Many consumers will prioritize goods and services that are inclusive of persons with disabilities.

2. A wider talent pool

Organizations that are inclusive of neurodiversity are more likely to attract neurodivergent talent. A **recent study** by Texthelp found that the majority of neurodivergent workers (93%) would be more likely to apply for a job at, or continue to work for, a company which they knew was supporting neurodivergent employees well. When employers need to fill skills gaps, many are still screening out neurodivergent individuals and the unique skills they possess.

3. Extraordinary skills

Organizations that welcome neurodiverse individuals benefit from a workforce of different thinkers. That brings benefits including creativity, innovation, productivity, and more. Different minds can approach a company's products, services, and business challenges with different solutions.

In some cases, neurodivergent people are sought after for specific strengths and abilities. A report from **Made By Dyslexia** found that Dyslexic Thinking skills match with the skills of the future (as identified by the World Economic Forum). These include visualization, creativity, cognitive flexibility, logical reasoning, complex problem solving, and more. Emphasizing how these extraordinary skills are sought-after by employers is the **Dyslexic Thinking** movement. A movement which encourages dyslexic individuals to showcase their valuable skill set by adding Dyslexic Thinking as a skill on LinkedIn.

4. A loyal workforce

We thrive best in a place where we feel supported, valued and celebrated. We're more likely to remain in a workplace where we can bring our full selves to work, and feel that we belong. Organizations that nurture neurodivergent talent are more likely to create an environment where employees feel included and want to remain. Alike to neurodivergent workers, **research by Texthelp** found that the majority of neurotypical workers (63%) are also more likely to be attracted to and loyal to companies that support neurodivergent employees well.

Despite the many benefits, **64%** of neurodivergent employees feel their organization could be doing more to support them. Employers are missing out on some simple but effective adjustments they could make to recruit and retain neurodivergent individuals. A community of individuals who bring a wealth of talent to any organization.
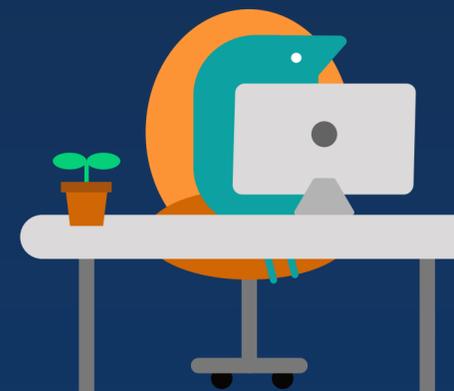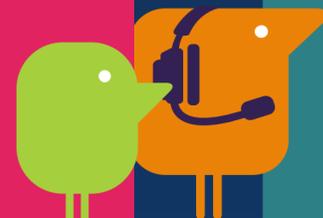
Creating a workplace that embraces diverse thinkers

A good first step is to educate yourself on neurodiverse conditions, and raise awareness of neurodiversity across your teams. It's also vital to proactively create an inclusive workplace culture. Employees should feel comfortable and confident to discuss challenges and be themselves. They should also feel empowered to understand, communicate and work their own way.

For this to happen, employers must be flexible, and willing to adapt the workplace to suit individual needs. This is where the principles of Universal Design come in.

Universal Design is a strategy for making workplace environments welcoming and usable to the most diverse range of people possible. Without the need for adaptation or specialized design. While universal design is necessary for some, it is useful for all.

Applying the principles of Universal Design to the workplace can minimize challenges that neurodivergent individuals face. It can also maximize job success regardless of a person's diagnosis. Thoughtful, inclusive design makes the world easier for everyone.

In addition, organizations should take steps to celebrate and amplify the voices of neurodivergent employees. When employees feel truly welcomed, heard, and understood, they're more likely to feel confident to open up and be who they are.

Starting from recruitment, employers must think about how to consider and include neurodivergent people throughout the whole lifecycle of the employment journey.

13 key factors to consider to improve the employee experience

Recruit

1 **Choose accessible platforms** to advertise with. To make sure you choose vendors that are accessible, it can be helpful to have an **accessible procurement process** in place. Or if the application is online via your own website, consider adding **assistive technology** to the page. This could increase text size, provide visual alternatives to text and have the option for dual color highlighting.

2 **Consider alternative interview approaches.** For example, assigning a real life task vs. a question and answer interview session. Where questions are asked, review how they are phrased. Remove complicated language and hypothetical questions.

3 **Ask what you can do to improve the experience.** Rather than asking for candidates to 'disclose' or 'declare' a disability, we can simply ask if there are any supports or adjustments they need to help make the process a more positive experience.

4 **Showcase what you're doing to support neurodivergent employees.** By sharing stories from your people, neurodivergent applicants will feel more comfortable to reveal their neurodivergent strengths. In recent **research by Texthelp**, 56% of neurodivergent employees revealed they opened up about their neurodivergence because their organization advertises as being an inclusive employer.

Develop

5 **Ensure that the HR department is educated on neurodiversity** and acting as an advocate for neurodiverse employees. Take advantage of the many resources available to support employers in attracting and supporting diverse talent, such as **Disability:IN**.

6 **Ask each employee what you can do to support them.** Find out what tools and support they need to work more efficiently.

7 **Offer inclusive technology software.** Demonstrate inclusivity by giving all staff **tools** that allow them to choose how they work — without them having to ask.

8 **Keep language simple** in workplace communications. **Use short, clear, succinct sentences.** Clear communication and checking for understanding is important. This can be supported by using a mix of verbal, visual and written formats.

9 **Allow flexibility** with working hours and/or working virtually.

10 **Consider varying needs** when designing office space, or desk/workstation placement, such as creating spaces for quiet contemplation with fewer distractions.

31% of neurodivergent workers say they would benefit from specialist software or more accessible communication

24% said they would like Neurodiversity awareness training for colleagues, to improve understanding and reduce negative misconceptions

17% said they'd benefit from a dedicated support network, for example a neurodiversity group or a buddy/mentor system

16% said they'd benefit from dedicated quiet spaces

Source: **Texthelp, 2022**

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Retain

11 **Conduct neurodiversity awareness training** with all employees. This can help to remove any preconceptions around neurodivergent individuals.

12 **Amplify employee voices** with Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). ERGs create a community space for neurodivergent staff to share their stories and experiences. They help employees to feel heard and secure in the workplace. They also empower neurodivergent employees to influence positive change alongside your HR and D&I teams. Disability:IN has developed an **ERG Maturity Model Matrix** to help ERGs maximize success.

13 **Celebrate neurodiversity with storytelling.** Share real experiences of neurodivergent people and celebrate their talents.

Empowering employees with tools to support diverse needs

Organizations who invest in the right tools for their staff see an increase in employee achievement, morale, and retention.

In a typical workplace environment, employees use multiple tools throughout their day — jumping between many platforms, browsers and devices. They are expected to access and read everything from emails to web pages and PDFs. These documents are all in a written format, and employees are expected to respond with typed communication. This approach doesn't suit every worker. That's where **inclusive technology** comes in.

Inclusive technologies are specifically designed to help people with disabilities perform tasks in a way that's best suited to them. These tools are necessary for some, **but beneficial for all**. All employees benefit from being able to work in the way that they prefer.

In the workplace, inclusive technology examples include:

- **Assistive reading devices** including **text to speech** software to help auditory processors such as dyslexics

- **Memory aids** such as digital recorders and digital timers

- **Literacy support** including dyslexic spell checkers and word prediction

- **Screen tint tools** to help see text more easily; screen filters to help those sensitive to the intensity or frequency of light

- **Low vision assistive technology** such as screen readers and speech recognition software

Inclusive technology tools need to be able to work everywhere. This means across all of the platforms and applications that employees use throughout the day.

That means **24/7 access**, and compatibility across every device.

It is vital that these kinds of tools are **provided to everyone**, not just those with identified neurodiversity. Embedding the use of these tools into the culture of the workplace as part of your regular practice is key. It **demonstrates awareness** of diverse working styles and needs, and **empowers all employees to thrive.** It also fosters a sense of **inclusivity and valuing the contributions of everyone.**
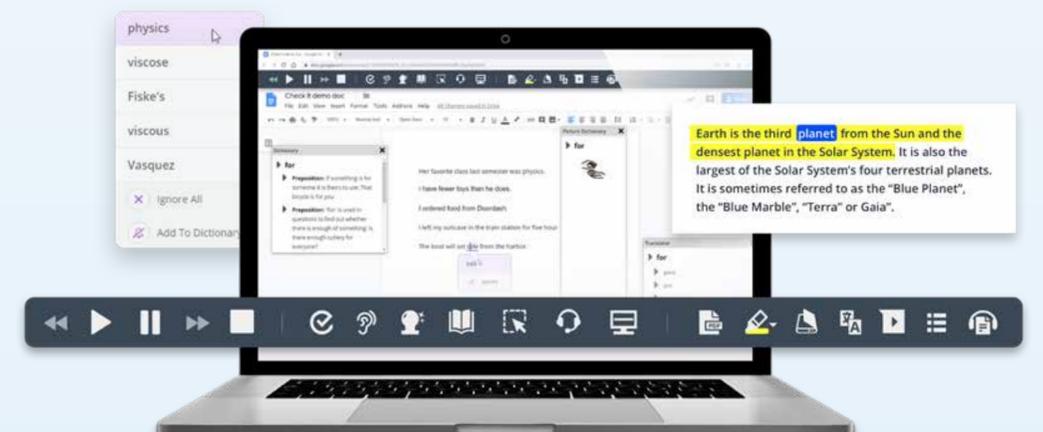
The path forward

There is growing recognition of the many benefits that neurodivergent employees bring to the workplace. Yet, the reality for many neurodivergent individuals is that the workplace can present many challenges.

Hiring neurodivergent talent will help companies innovate their products and services and build a more diverse and inclusive workforce. Companies must do a better job at tapping into this talent pool. This will only help create richer and more diverse experiences for everyone.

There are many companies that are doing amazing work in the space of diversity and inclusion. The number of companies empowering their employees with disabilities has **increased 40-fold** over the past four years. Companies including Bank of America, Ernst & Young, **KPMG** and Dell have shined a spotlight on the benefits of a neurodiverse workforce. These companies are leading the way as examples of establishing a more diverse and inclusive workplace culture. **But there is still much work to be done.**

We must work together to make companies aware of the potential gains of hiring a neurodiverse talent pool and encourage them to make disability inclusion a strategic priority. **All employees should be supported with the tools and technologies they need to succeed as a matter of course.**

32% have experienced a lack of career progression

34% have experienced difficulty in recruitment/interview processes

56% have experienced communication barriers in their place of work

61% have experienced stigma and feeling misunderstood in the workplace

Martin McKay
Founder & CEO at Texthelp

Texthelp supports organizations on their diversity, inclusion and accessibility journey.

Martin founded Texthelp in 1996, and has since spent his work life developing technology for people with disabilities. Texthelp is a world leading Assistive Technology company creating inclusive software that helps people to read, write, express their thoughts and share information more accurately & fluently, across all stages of life.

In 2017, Martin received the Presidential Award in recognition of lifetime contribution to dyslexia and literacy from the International Dyslexia Association. In the past, he has served on the Assistive Technology Industry Association Board as well as the NIMAS board for the USA Office of Special Education Programs. Today Texthelp supports over 50 million users worldwide. Martin's goal is to make sure that by 2030 Texthelp will have advanced the literacy and understanding of one billion people.

Jill Houghton
President & CEO of Disability:IN

Disability:IN is the leading global nonprofit organization for advancing business disability inclusion and equality.

Jill has more than 25 years of diverse leadership experience driving disability inclusion. Jill's passion for disability inclusion was ignited by challenges she experienced having a learning disability. Jill leads a team of talented and diverse individuals, including people with disabilities, who are working to build an inclusive global economy that enables people with disabilities to participate fully and meaningfully.