

# Creative Differences

A handbook for embracing neurodiversity  
in the creative industries

# Creative Differences

A handbook for embracing neurodiversity  
in the creative industries

Universal Music has collaborated with illustrator  
Megan Rhiannon to create the imagery used  
throughout the handbook.

[www.megan-rhiannon.com](http://www.megan-rhiannon.com)

Second Edition

“  
**I wish a word  
like ‘neurodiversity’  
had existed when  
I was younger...**  
”

foreword

I wish a word like ‘neurodiversity’ had existed when I was younger, because there were plenty of other words that got thrown around in its absence. Neurodiversity means to be part of the diversity of humanity as a whole. It means different, not flawed – and everyone is different. That’s something I could have done with knowing as I grew up.

At school the phrase I heard most commonly associated with my dyslexia and dyscalculia was “learning difficulties”; not exactly helpful, or accurate. It was hard; I had to find a way to make life work for me. In maths I would learn the pattern of the questions, because it was easier, for me, than dealing with the numbers themselves.

My first job was in a bar and I still remember the sting of shame when the manager realised I couldn’t count change. In the end, I used visual memory to devise my own way of doing it and I became a pretty good barmaid actually. I know I have an intelligence, a certain type of intelligence, but it’s visual and auditory; I remember and respond to colours and textures, to musical notes, not dates and names.

My thoughts are disordered, not especially logical and not at all linear – but that’s okay, they take me to more interesting places. As an artist, I think it’s a self-evident truth that not thinking like everyone else is positive and beneficial. But even as I grew up, started doing something I love and even achieved some success, I still felt that there were these labels people could throw at me. People would talk as if my songs, my achievements, my career etc. had been achieved despite things like my dyslexia. But I was thinking, might it not be because of those things?

Neurodiversity might well fit more comfortably in a creative environment than other areas, but it exists in all walks of life and positive attitudes towards it can help all of us.

It would be wonderful if people could walk into jobs and be honest about how they move through the world. And that the fact they see things differently could be an asset. Because ultimately, wherever you work, and in all aspects of life, the key to happiness and success is an environment where everyone is encouraged to be not only their best self but their true self.

**Florence Welch**

# Introduction

“  
**There is no doubt  
we are still at  
the beginning.**  
”

When we launched this handbook, back in January 2020, we hoped it would be a helpful resource for embracing the talents of autistic people and those with dyslexia, ADHD and other forms of neurocognitive variation – so-called neurodiversity – within workforces in the creative sector.

The reaction to the book was beyond our wildest dreams. We’ve heard from people and companies across the world – and not just within the creative industries. As well as many parents and schools, a police force and speed camera operator are just some of those who have been in touch.

Then something else happened which we weren’t expecting: the world was turned on its head by a global pandemic.

For this second edition of Creative Differences, we have again been guided by, and have learned from, people with lived experiences. We have returned to many of those who contributed to the first book to ask how they think the world of work has changed, drawing on their insights to update the recommendations we feel are still applicable to the creative industries.

It’s widely accepted that around 15% of the population has one or more of the neurodiverse characteristics explored in this handbook. In the creative sector the figure may be double that. But while there is recognition that world-changing ideas come from people who think differently, according to the Office for National Statistics, just 21.7% of autistic people are in employment.

There has clearly been progress since 2020 – more organisations are talking openly about neurodiversity and at Universal Music we have seen a significant increase in disclosures amongst both staff and people applying for roles – but there is no doubt we are still at the beginning. So we hope our updated recommendations – covering 10 areas including recruitment, mentorship and career progression – will continue to be a useful practical resource.

Recent changes in workplaces have brought with them positives around flexibility, openness and understanding – developments we’ll explore in the following pages. But there has been no change in our most important learning from this work: the fundamental importance of kindness and respect in company cultures.

**David Joseph CBE,  
Chairman and CEO, Universal Music UK**

# We need to talk about neurodiversity

**Neurodiverse (ND) and neurodiversity** refer to the infinite variation in cognitive functioning that can lead to differences in thinking, attention and memory. This handbook explores the experiences of people with specific facets of neurodiversity such as ASD, ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia and Tourette Syndrome (for definitions of these, see page 109).

For some, there's a problem with words like 'neurodivergent'. It's a catch-all, collective term for very different traits with an infinite amount of variation. In general, except where making a direct quote, we do not use terms such as 'neurodivergent', 'neurotypical' and similar, as these phrases can emphasise difference and 'otherness'. As Thomas Armstrong PhD, author of *The Power of Neurodiversity: Unleashing the Advantages of Your Differently Wired Brain*, put it, "there is no standard brain".

## Double negatives

Thomas Armstrong pointed out that the language of neurodiversity has inbuilt negativity. The 'D' of ASD is 'disorder'. ADHD has not one negative word, but two (deficit and disorder). The names may have stuck, but it's important that we challenge some of the conventional norms as the narrative finally moves towards positive recognition. Possessing traits which are not seen as 'neurotypical' does not mean those traits are not 'right' or 'normal'.

## We're not all Rain Man

Pop culture references and conventional wisdom can be damaging. For people with autism, movies like Rain Man brought an expectation of genius-level ability hiding just out of sight. Kim Peek, the inspiration behind Dustin Hoffman's character in Rain Man, wasn't even autistic. Some people with autism do possess incredible abilities, but lots of people possess incredible abilities – and they aren't all placed on pedestals.

## The dyslexic autistic

Intersectionality – that is, having more than one neurodiverse trait – is very common, and it can sometimes make specific diagnoses difficult. That can be a problem for any organisation whose processes are built around specific labels. But it doesn't have to be an issue at all when you take a holistic approach to inclusivity because it doesn't matter what the labels are.

## Keep it secret?

In a supportive environment, disclosure can be a positive and rewarding experience. But if neurodiversity is not talked about in an organisation, you don't know whether to expect a positive or negative response to your disclosure.

## The legacy of diagnosis

The era in which you were brought up can impact diagnosis and affect later working life. Dyslexia seemed the 'go-to' diagnosis in the 70s; in the 90s it was ADHD. Today, parents increasingly have the option of paying for swift diagnosis, often making support dependant on wealth.

Whether you are diagnosed, what you are diagnosed with and its severity can depend on who you see and when you see them.

The impact of diagnosis can be positive or negative, giving a new found confidence and personal understanding to some, whilst highlighting difference and enhancing feelings of isolation and low self-esteem (especially without proper support) to others.



“  
**People with ADHD  
characteristics are  
more likely to reach  
higher levels of  
creative thought.**  
”

### The links between creativity and neurodiversity

You don't have to look too hard to find long lists of incredibly successful and influential creatives who think differently. Steve Jobs, Steven Spielberg, Agatha Christie, Richard Branson, Mozart, Picasso, Stanley Kubrick, Marilyn Monroe and Andy Warhol all have (or are reported to have had) autism, Asperger's, dyslexia or ADHD. Recent additions to that list have included Dr Maggie Aderin-Pocock and Greta Thunberg as well as a host of recording artists.

But is it simply the case that any pool of people will inevitably feature a breadth of neurodiversity – or is there something about neurodiverse conditions that 'powers' creative achievement?



Creative thinking requires a 'toolbox' of capabilities. A person's neurodiversity appears to affect the size and contents of that toolbox. Research shows that, for example, individuals with ADHD outperform others when thinking creatively. Autistic traits may put an individual at an advantage when generating ideas. They may not generate as many ideas, but the ideas they generate are truly novel, skipping the obvious and launching straight into the 'blue sky'.

It's not just in the generation of ideas where neurodiversity can offer something more. Studies have shown autism can spark greater verbal creativity. In his 2004 book *Creativity Is Forever*, Gary Davis identified 22 reoccurring personality traits of creative people and found a significant overlap between those traits and behavioural descriptions of ADHD. The conclusion, as the book notes, is that "people with ADHD characteristics are more likely to reach higher levels of creative thought".

Perhaps author Malcolm Gladwell best summed it up when he spoke about the power of what he called 'desirable difficulties'. "We see so many entrepreneurs who have dyslexia. When you talk to them, they will tell you that they succeeded not in spite of [it], but because of it."

“  
**We see so many entrepreneurs who have dyslexia. When you talk to them, they will tell you that they succeeded not in spite of [it], but because of it.**  
”

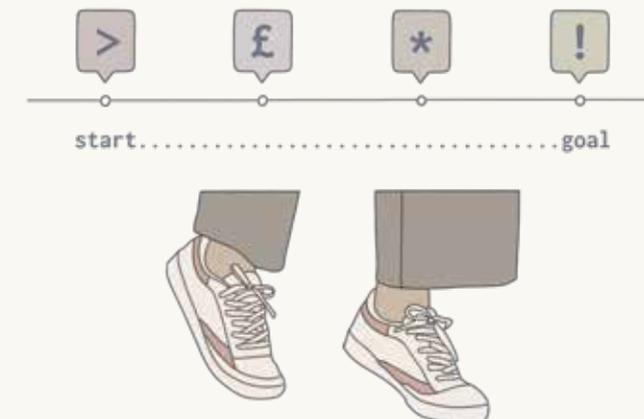
**Background**

## Background

As part of our wider inclusion programme at Universal Music UK, we commissioned the first comprehensive piece of research on ND experiences within the creative industries. The ambition was two-fold. First, to provide insight into the existing perception of neurodiversity within the sector; and second to identify practical steps organisations can take to attract, support and retain talent.

This handbook comes from the heart of the creative sector, with contributions made from individuals across our community. In 2020 we published our findings with the goal of advancing the prospects of the differently abled. It is primarily a handbook by a creative business for creative businesses, which we have used to make practical change within our organisation, and have been heartened by stories that others have done likewise.

Neurodiverse traits such as dyslexia, autism or ADHD help us put the diversity in neurodiversity, and if we don't embrace that, then we're doing a vast disservice to a great many people and missing an enormous opportunity to benefit from their abilities.



In making our recommendations we were guided by the following themes arising from our research:

### Think holistically

Change can benefit the whole organisation.

### Talking is contagious

Organisations that talk about neurodiversity via awareness sessions and staff training not only raise general understanding, they create an environment that better enables individuals to disclose a condition.

### Avoid ring-fencing

We need to create environments where all staff can flourish without feeling 'othered'.

### One size never fits all

Organisations need to be flexible – in terms of workspace, conditions, communication, management and more – in responding to individual needs.

### Keep talking

Maintain regular dialogue across each stage of the journey, tailor to the needs of the individual and implement necessary changes.

### Resist imposing solutions

It's important not to generalise and 'parachute' in well-meaning adjustments without the full involvement of the individual. Change designed by staff working together will be more successful.



## Background

We have now reached a point where some UK employers are hiring specific ND skill sets for specific tasks – for example, employing teams of autistic employees for data and computer skills.

Some have pushed back against this on the basis that it highlights the ‘otherness’ of individuals, not inclusion. This is clearly a work in progress, but the idea of asking for specific ND talents has to be taken as a general positive. It’s certainly something that would never have happened 10 years ago.

For neurodiversity to not simply be tolerated or accepted but to be valued and welcomed, organisations need to aim for what Dr Nancy Doyle, a chartered psychologist with a specialism in neurodiversity, described as “systematic inclusion” in Personnel Today.



## Background

When an organisation reaches this level its ND-inclusive practices are ‘baked into’ the organisational structure and into its people’s thinking. For example:

Reasonable adjustments are established (and implemented) at induction.

Coaching and mentoring is well established to help managers manage better and help all individuals integrate, progress and succeed.

Educating the whole team helps create a supportive environment, where individuals know there is understanding of tics and stimming, for example, or their need for a quiet workplace.

No obligation to attend social events but ensuring those that are held let everyone get involved without feeling exposed.

Lack of eye contact isn’t an automatic negative at interview.

# Have we started a new era of working?

Unprecedented shifts in working life have happened because of the pandemic. It has accelerated great change in the way we work, and office life. Flexible and hybrid working is more widely accepted and adopted than ever before. Many of us have greater choice in where and how we spend our working hours. There seems little doubt this flexibility can bring many benefits but there are also challenges to be aware of.



For the Neurodiverse community, these changes to working practices have had a particular impact.

## Time to reflect

Emma Case, the founder of Women Beyond The Box said, “It wasn’t a surprise to hear many of my neurodivergent clients talk about how they were now feeling calmer and less distracted, resulting in more focus. This shift away from the daily commute and office-based working had a positive impact on both their mental wellbeing and output.”

Emma highlights, “What is often left out of this conversation is neurodiversity through the lens of intersectionality. The experience of being both neurodivergent and Black in the workplace presents its own unique set of challenges. It’s having to navigate the very real experience of both ableism and racism and how this impacts a person’s ability to thrive within an office environment.” Working from home temporarily alleviated this pressure.

Not having to deal with social interactions, office politics and commuting and the energy they require to navigate was cited as a positive by many. As music industry professional Andy Edwards says, “Socialising sucks a lot of energy out of me because it’s a cognitive process, not an intuitive one for someone who is autistic. I love socialising as much as the next person, but lock down enabled me to pace myself, and do it in smaller doses while still being impactful.”

## There have been positives

### Megan

“Everyone seems to be a little more aware that most have more going on than is obvious at first glance and are more patient as a result.”

### Emma

“It confirms that we can work differently and accommodate the needs of individuals without compromising our work – something people with invisible disabilities were pushing for prior to the pandemic.”

### Andy

“Not having to worry about face-to-face meetings means you can really do a deep dive into the stuff you're working on. It also means you can be more selective and purposeful with the meetings you have and the events you attend.”

## And also challenges

### Pip

“As a dyslexic, I rely a lot on visual cues so everything being virtual is more challenging.”

### Neil

“Communal bonding and play are really important for creativity. When everybody's transactional through instant messages and team calls, you don't get that camaraderie that you might by spending time in each other's company. Also, the volume of messages, notifications and distractions can be particularly overwhelming for ND people.”

### Andy

“The random connections that you make in the industry are vital and so many opportunities in all of our careers come from bumping into someone and introductions.”

“  
**The pandemic has pushed lots of businesses to be more empathetic to their workplace as a whole and realise that everyone's got different challenges.**  
”

Pip

A few of our interviewees talked about how the change in work practices has resulted in a greater understanding from employers as well as increased confidence for employees, who feel more able to ask for what they need.

“The pandemic made people a little more open and forgiving, I think everyone seems happier to talk about shifting timelines, a little more understanding of “bad” days,” said Creative Differences illustrator Megan Rhiannon, whose new lockdown-inspired work is on p24.

While the flexibility of home working was largely cited as a positive, there were reports of online communication being difficult. As Neil Milliken, Global Head of Accessibility & Digital Inclusion at Atos, says:

“The amount your brain has to process to interpret meaning and emotion when you're online as opposed to in person, when you can only see part of the body and you don't get all of the other subtle signals, is significant.”

Pip Jamieson, the founder and CEO of the The Dots, added that home working can disrupt the ability to foster a cohesive team. She said:

“I have quite a neurodiverse team and working from home is great because it's comfortable, but is it great for our mental health long term that we're not interacting much? I don't want to force my team back in [to the office] but I actually do see them happier when they are in. Is [flexible working] going to build a cohesive, happy team, long term? I think the jury's still out.”

# Recommendations



## Our ND panel

Over the following pages you'll explore the real life experiences of our neurodiversity panel. Their names have been changed to protect their identities, but roles, words and specific conditions are authentic.

# 01. First steps

## The barrier

The level of awareness and understanding about neurodiversity and individual needs is low across UK workplaces.

## In real life

### Faisal

"The more companies say that they have an understanding policy in place for neurodiverse conditions, the more people will feel encouraged to apply for jobs. Employers just need to ask their employees what they need, and form close emotional relationships with all employees so those discussions are easier and more likely to happen."

“  
**You can see the  
difference between  
box-ticking and people  
being really committed  
and seeing the value  
in diversity.**  
”

Holly

## Recommendations

**David**

“I talk a lot which means others sometimes do not get the chance to speak. The thing is, I don't really notice when I'm doing it, so I appreciate colleagues calling me out (in a good way!) and telling me to let someone else speak.”

**Holly**

“Having diverse teams makes sense for business. Being successful means innovation and staying one step ahead, and businesses can't simply be made up of one group. Yet although many things have changed, recruitment still hasn't. Many neurodivergent people are self-employed because they feel they have no choice.

You can see the difference between box-ticking and people being really committed and seeing the value in diversity.”

## Positive changes

### **Deliver neurodiversity awareness education to all employees:**

Initiate a clear and open strategy to increase understanding by taking neurodiversity training and awareness company-wide, so individuals can understand their colleagues' needs but also articulate their own. Ensure training is led by, or at least involves, people with neurodiverse conditions. Make this handbook available to all staff.

### **Foster a safe, understanding environment:**

This can help create an environment open to disclosure – although you should not make disclosure a requirement.



### **Create a neurodiversity policy or make neurodiversity a distinct part of your current inclusion policy:**

Build neurodiversity into your current inclusion policy, such as the following sample wording: “We also recognise the importance of diversity of thought within our teams and are fully committed to embracing and maximising the talents of autistic people and those with dyslexia, ADHD and other forms of neurocognitive variation. We will always seek to make appropriate adjustments to recruitment, workplaces and work processes to be fully inclusive to people with different needs and working styles. If you need us to make any reasonable adjustments for you from application onwards, please contact us.”

### **Create an action plan for neurodiversity inclusion:**

Alongside offering mentors within the team, consider nominating or training a ‘point person’ or ‘neurodiversity patron’ from senior leadership to sit on a neurodiversity board. If you have a helpline/employee wellbeing service, ensure the service has had ND training.

# 02. Recruitment and application



## The barrier

Standardised and rigid application processes won't suit every applicant. When you overload the working memory and add stress into the mix, you risk "exaggerating their weaknesses and reducing, if not eliminating, their strengths". (Westminster AchieveAbility Commission report)



**In real life**

“  
**I feel that  
interviewers can see  
my neurodiversity  
but they don't  
necessarily  
understand it.**  
”

Bea

**Bea**

“I have struggled with interview and application processes. I feel that interviewers can see my neurodiversity but they don't necessarily understand it. For me, it was really useful to be offered the choice between making a film, a collage or a regular application. I was the only one who did a collage, but it suited my strengths.”

**Clara**

“I don't like plans being changed at the last minute, so when I arrived at the interview and was told I would actually be having two interviews it threw me off. It would have been so much better if I'd been told in advance and had time to prepare.”

**Ian**

“Unrealistic job specifications are immediately off-putting. Asking for someone who is ‘highly creative’, or ‘an extrovert’ as well as being ‘detail-orientated’ and ‘on time’. I’m creative – I’m an ideas person – but I can’t do these other things. Who can?”

**Gaynor**

“Being able to go and see a space before the interview (even just on photos) would be helpful. Interviews are challenging enough without being overwhelmed with new spaces as well.”

**Creative employer**

“Putting structures in place to help neurodiverse people has actually helped everyone. It’s created a better working environment because the expectations and parameters around our work have become clearer.”

**Positive changes**

Diversify the way you advertise, receive applications and assess applicants so opportunities are accessible to everyone.

**Advertise elsewhere:**

Look beyond ads on text-heavy sites like LinkedIn. Use visual platforms like Instagram too.

**Promote yourself as a neurodiversity-inclusive employer:**

And then make sure your actions back that up.

**Rework job descriptions:**

Split job skills into necessary and desirable. Keep the format clear and concise. Remove unnecessary wordiness because asking overcomplicated questions can lead to working memory overload. Remove references to any specific cultural fit of the company.

**Offer flexible application formats:**

Be open to alternative application processes (e.g. video or artwork). If you use an online form, ensure it can be spell-checked and grammar-checked.

**Carefully consider the use of psychometric tests:**

They can 'disable' those with neurodiverse conditions.

**Revise candidate selection:**

Use a diverse panel to avoid unconscious bias creeping into the selection. Even better, consider removing details like name, age and gender from the applications the panel see as they can all feed bias.

**Be transparent about your assessment process.**

**Offer interview alternatives:**

Consider whether a trial, a presentation or short placement would deliver better results than an interview. Ask the individual what would help them deliver their best.

**Make reasonable adjustments:**

If you are running an interview, consider the following adjustments. Remember, don't impose these – ask the individual if any of them would be of benefit:

- Seeing questions in advance.
- Having additional time to read/prepare.
- Visiting the place of interview in advance and giving clear directions to the interview location.
- Requesting that the interview takes place via video call or in a different space.
- Offering an interview time that doesn't require travel in peak hours.
- A preparatory phone or video call to outline the interview process.
- Being accompanied.

**At interview:**

Ask clear, direct questions.

**Keep improving:**

Gather feedback on the changes you make and explore alternative processes for continual improvement.

## 03. Joining the team



“  
**I wish somebody  
could have  
explained the  
unwritten rules  
to me.**  
”

Ang

### The barrier

There is limited discussion around individual needs when first settling into organisations.

### In real life

#### Ang

“When I first joined the orchestra I found it hard joining a new group of people that had already formed bonds. They already had their group dynamics and unwritten social rules – and everything changed again when we went on tour. I wish that somebody could have explained [the rules] to me.”



### Positive changes

#### Discuss:

Ensure every starter has a thorough and structured discussion about their functional, emotional and social needs. Encourage individuals to ask for what they need and establish a culture of self-advocacy (i.e. everyone should feel able to ask for what they need).

#### Take a tour:

Give every new starter a thorough, structured tour of the environment, including key areas of the building, breakout rooms, available tools and the individual's own workspace.

#### Introductions:

Ensure every new starter meets the head of inclusion and your neurodiversity panel, if you have them, as well as a dedicated 'point person'.

### Offer functional support:

Give everyone the opportunity to ask for job support e.g. someone who can help them set up reminder alerts for deadlines, or who can bring them up to speed on any meeting they have missed. Discuss adjustments to the environment or your standard working practices that might benefit the individual. Offer technology that can support an employee e.g. a Livescribe smart pen or C-Pen Reader to convert text to speech and take notes, Speechify text-to-speech software, Trello or X-Mind to help with organisation and provide access to Microsoft open source materials.



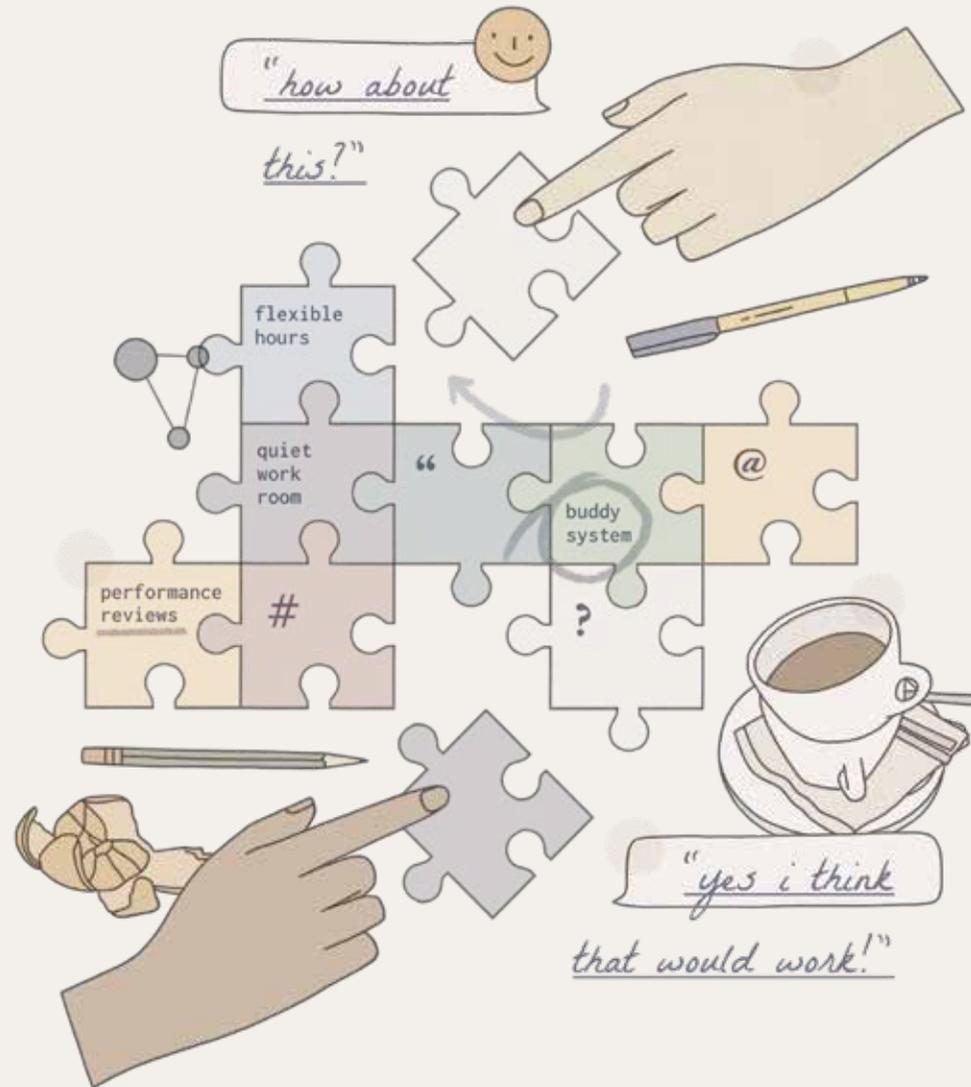
### Address emotional needs:

Establish a confidential record of conditions, prior triggers, needs or requirements that can be shared at the discretion of the individual. Offer and direct individuals to external job coaches or other forms of support. If an employee wishes to disclose their condition to their team, give them support and encouragement to produce a bio of their working style. The bio should explain how their ND characteristic may affect work and behaviour, for instance a person with ADHD may explain they need time to recover after an intense period of working.

### Respond to social needs:

Ensure new recruits are given the choice to meet colleagues individually or in small groups rather than having to be introduced at a company meeting or 'Friday drinks'. Explain social norms e.g. offering to make tea or organising birthday cake for colleagues and offer a peer-to-peer 'buddy scheme' to help navigate them.

# 04. Management and mentorship



## The barrier

There is a lack of direct and intimate communication and support for addressing needs and strengths surrounding neurodiversity.

## In real life

### Gaynor

"I found a mentor through a YouTube video I made. We meet every six to eight weeks and look at how work and life are going. Because they are also ND and have mental health issues, they really understand my strengths, challenges and how my brain functions."

### Holly

“I am a coach, and I have ADHD. Many coaches tend to focus on encouraging people to be more productive. They think in terms of the business. I tend to focus on helping the individual. So, for example, I worked with one person who always stayed late because that’s when they could focus, so I suggested that they come in later and stay later.

There will always be big workplace changes (such as greater flexibility) that will benefit everyone, but it’s equally important to understand the needs of the individual.”



### Bea

“The museum at which I work has a youth volunteer programme involving people with a wide range of neurodiversity. It’s easy for me to provide support because I can see things from the volunteers’ perspectives. Using picture maps helps me – and it helps many of the volunteers too.”

### Ian

“I worked for an arts organisation that had a diversity policy, and my manager took the time to understand how the policy and my ADHD affected me and my work, and gave me support when I needed it. One of my strengths is seeing the bigger picture, so my manager gave me free rein to manage our social media platforms and content strategy.”

### David

“Bureaucracy is my fear. My boss recognised I couldn’t do it and put me with someone who could help me fill stuff in.”

## Positive changes

### Deliver the right training:

Make sure line managers, mentors and HR have specific neurodiversity training that involves ND individuals. For example, when communicating, managers and mentors should learn to use bullet points, short emails and short, clear sentences to ensure everyone can understand them.

### Offer peer support:

If the individual agrees, make sure peers understand their needs so they can provide support.

### Appoint mentors:

Allocate a mentor to offer support outside the line management structure. The mentor does not have to be ND, although mentors who share ND traits with the mentee can be particularly effective. Mentors outside the mentee's workplace can also be effective.

### Prevent problems:

Ensure regular and honest catch ups take place with mentor, manager, job coach or ND-trained HR person to address any issues before they become problems.

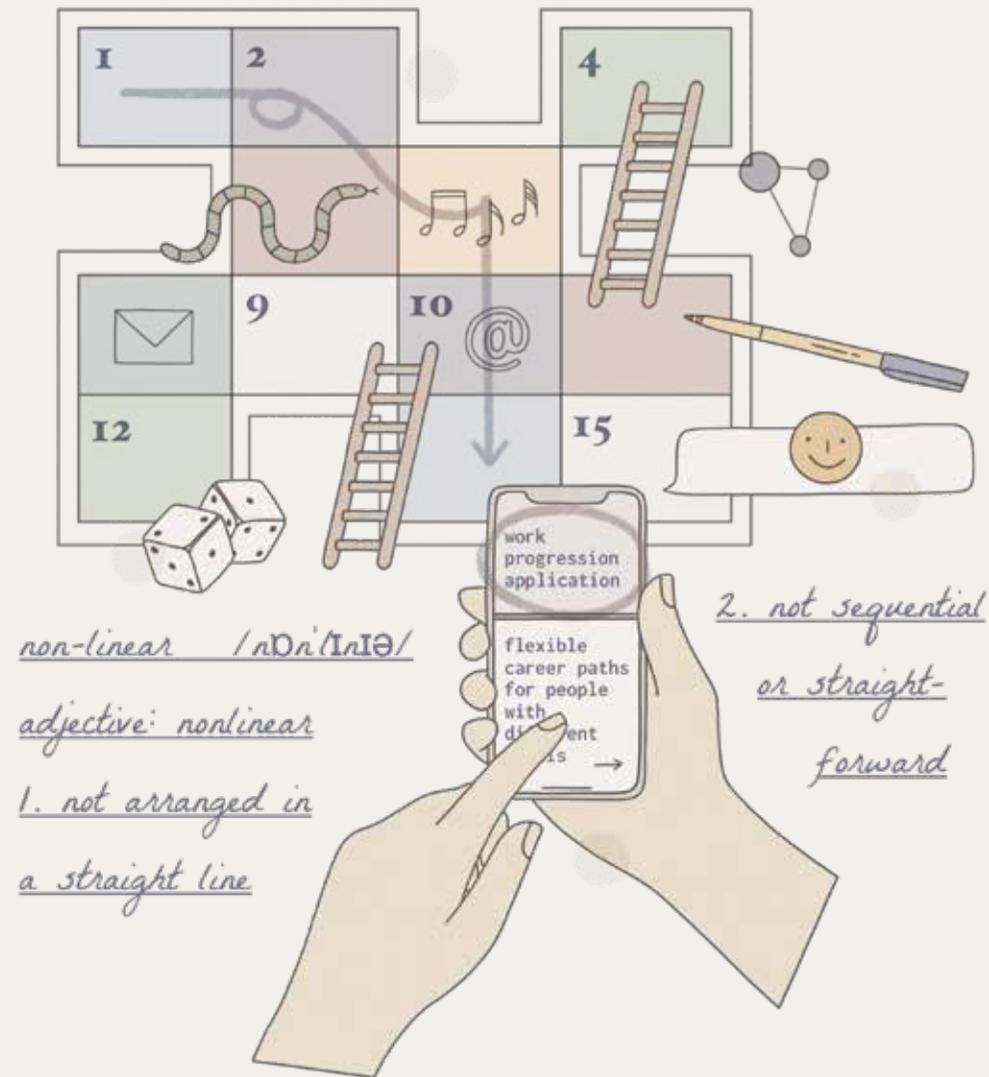
“

There will always be big workplace changes – such as greater flexibility – that will benefit everyone, but it's equally important to understand the needs of the individual.

”

Holly

# 05. Career progression



## The barrier

ND individuals often feel that they need to change who they are in order to progress through their company and career.

## In real life

### Creative employer

“We’re trying to flex our structure to offer different career paths for different kinds of people with different skills. There’s no reason why ND individuals with neurodiversity can’t progress – they just might need a different path.”

“  
**We’re trying to flex  
our structure to  
offer different career  
paths for different  
kinds of people with  
different skills.**  
”

Creative employer

## Positive changes

### **Personalise personal development plans:**

Create personal development plans for individuals addressing short and long term career and life goals, avoiding standardised job descriptions.

### **Create new progression paths:**

Support employees to achieve their potential by shaping career progression paths to their needs and strengths. Not every career needs to progress the same way. Open up non-linear progression paths to support diversity of opportunity, creating a system that celebrates and promotes everyone’s neurodiversity.

### **Refine the application:**

If progression requires an application, ensure your application processes are inclusive. See page 39.

### **Lead by example:**

With their permission, let the ND individuals in your organisation act as internal and external role models for career progression.

# 06. Retention



## The barrier

A number of our panel have been through periods where they've found it difficult to hold down a job for a long time. Often, that's been because they have felt unwelcome, not fully integrated or not valued by their team.

## In real life

### Ang

"When I disclosed my condition on social media I got a varied reaction at work. Some colleagues were understanding and supportive; others didn't believe me. Some bullied me."

### Bea

"My dyspraxia, dyslexia and dyscalculia have made it harder to find work, and I've lost jobs because of my conditions."

“  
**I’ve lost jobs  
because of my  
conditions.**  
”

Bea

## Recommendations

**Ian**

“I had a difficult time with one line manager who would take me aside for writing one word wrong in an email. When I eventually quit I didn’t receive any support from HR.”

**David**

“I move organisations a lot – but I enjoy that. I’m hired to solve problems creatively. Once the problem has been solved, I don’t get a kick out of running the systems I create. I want to find new problems to solve.”

**Creative employer**

“We had an employee who I strongly suspect was autistic but they never disclosed it to me. In hindsight, we could have communicated in different ways. What people took as uncommunicative or unhelpful could have been handled in a different way. We need to try and help people to be open and clear and share diagnoses. It’s positive for the company to know, certainly not the opposite.”

## Positive changes

### Assess the problem:

Not every employee who moves on will feel pushed out. It's important to know whether retention is your organisation's problem or the individual's choice. Ask them.

### Review performance:

Hold quarterly reviews of the individual's personalised development plan and personal needs to ensure agreed changes have been actioned and to review their effectiveness.

### Review training:

Ensure the training you deliver results in everyone in the organisation feeling better able to support one another.

### Review integration:

Do all the individuals in your organisation feel welcomed, integrated and supported by peers? What is the risk of them leaving? Regularly review happiness and wellbeing via:

- Performance reviews
- General conversation
- Broader staff surveys

### Value difference:

Implement role model and buddy schemes with other ND employees to ensure difference is valued at all levels.

### Learn from exit interviews:

Use the exit process to reflect on the experiences of ND individuals within the company. Interview alternatives should be offered, such as written or audio. The exit process should take a 360 approach, interviewing peers, direct reports and line managers. Ensure each instance is properly reviewed, that learning points are identified, and that changes are made as a result of them.



# 07. Freelancing



## The barrier

The independent and transient nature of freelance work can be liberating and suit some people perfectly. Indeed, we found that many of our interviewees had either opted or felt forced to work freelance to reach their full potential. But for many it can also prevent client/employer understanding and inhibit the forming of supportive relationships.

## In real life

### Gaynor

“I would struggle with a 9-5 job rather than my current freelance set-up. Cities, the office setup, lighting and noise are difficult for me, as well as the office culture and lack of flexibility. Being a freelancer means I can work from wherever is easiest, go to therapy without disrupting my work day, and I don’t feel that anyone is looking over my shoulder.”

“  
**I would struggle  
with a 9-5 job rather  
than my current  
freelance set-up.**  
”

Gaynor

## Recommendations

### David

“If you give me something interesting to do I get obsessively focused on it at the expense of everything else. That’s great if it’s the thing I’m supposed to be doing and it has value but if not then I can easily get lost. I have tried to learn to control and harness it but it is something employers can help me with – by ensuring they only ask me to do valuable tasks – so I can stay on top of my time and workload.”

### Faisal

“I’m open about my dyscalculia with clients and I tell them I may need help to set a price for my work. I think people are quite baffled initially but they tend to be nice about it. I think it ultimately creates a better working environment – and I think it has made it easier for others to be open about things that affect them.

Yes, I probably could learn to count my working hours, but I will be 60 before I own that skill, and then you can debate whether that is time well spent, when my skill set and talents lie elsewhere.”

## Positive changes

### Work more effectively:

Employers can still provide valuable support without compromising freelancer independence. Explore the adjustments you could make that would benefit your freelancers. This has two elements:

#### i. For freelancers:

- With their consent, agree a format for briefing your freelancer. Have a separate discussion with each freelancer and explore any wider needs and adjustments.
- Provide clear briefs in the agreed format and with clear timescales and deadlines.
- Encourage early conversations about projects, costs and timescales to allow some flexibility (e.g. don't ask for costs on the spot).
- Provide as much notice as you can of upcoming jobs and don't make last minute changes.
- Involve freelancers in inclusion training.
- Consider making inclusive feedback channels for long term employees available to freelancers.

#### ii. For freelancers liaising with ND staff:

- Brief freelancers on the needs of any individual employee they may be working with closely, if the individual agrees to this.
- Require long-term freelancers to complete awareness and understanding training.
- If they agree, share the individual's working style bio with the freelancer (see page 51).



# 08. Working environment



## The barrier

Different types of environments and changes to the workplace (especially at short notice) can be disabling or stress-inducing.

## In real life

### Clara

"Being allocated a quiet room I can go to when my tics are having a bad day helps. It stops me feeling like I'm disturbing my colleagues if I'm making lots of noise."

“  
**It was impossible to  
tune into the main  
conversation when  
there were so many  
other conversations  
going on around.**

”

Holly

## Recommendations

### Holly

“I struggled at work after I moved to an open plan office. The door was open and people were continuously coming and going, there was music playing and phones were ringing. That was my idea of hell. The weekly meeting used to take place in the restaurant too. It was impossible to tune into the main conversation when there were so many other conversations going on around.”

### Gaynor

“I’m an internationally award-winning campaigner but I can’t work in an office and I wish companies would learn to create spaces that were conducive to me being successful. It’s a shame, because I would be really good at so many jobs but very few offices are accessible.”

## Positive changes

### Discuss needs:

Discuss with each individual how best to tailor the working environment to their needs. Don't impose adjustments just because you believe they will help. Always explore options with the individual.

### Provide a fixed workspace:

Hot desking culture is common in the creative industries, but it doesn't suit everyone. Where it would benefit the individual, provide a consistent work desk or studio space.

### Clearly define spaces:

Separate and clearly define areas for working and areas for socialising.

### Make flexible work patterns the norm:

Flexible working hours or the option to work off-site may help some people, especially if they struggle with the noise and stress of rush hour commutes. Offer a hybrid option, such as a video call link, in every set-up.

### Personalise the environment:

Not every environment is suitable for every individual. This can especially be the case in creative businesses, where music and noise can form an integral part of the workspace. To create environments that can work for everyone, consider the following:

- Individual control over light and sound (e.g. dimmers and headphones).
- If required, offer a quiet working space away from the noise of communal areas.
- Offer a separate working space away from any overpowering smells (e.g. food or perfume).
- Create a private space to which anyone who may occasionally feel overwhelmed or stressed can escape. This may also help on days when someone feels their condition or tics are more pronounced.

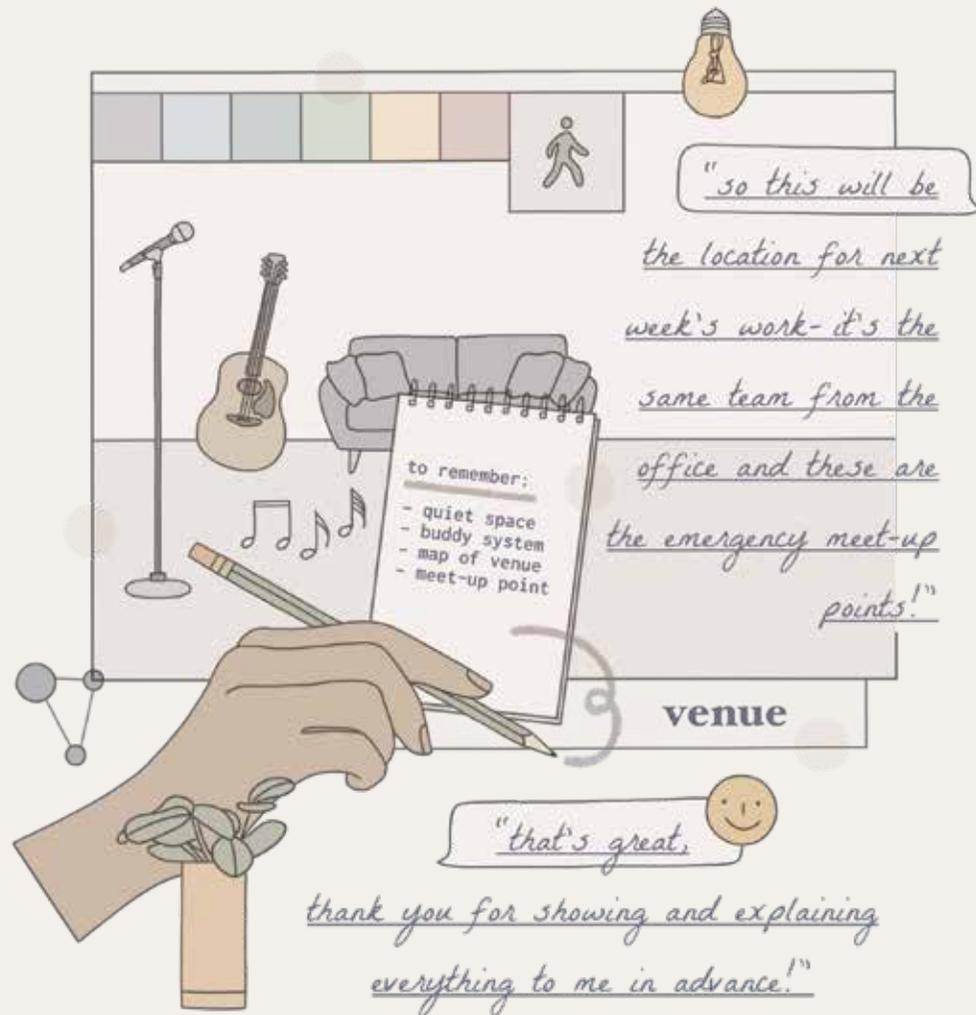
### Team check-ins:

Ensure there are fixed connection points with the team and chat channels for work/projects to keep contact open, plus regular chances to be in the office together in person.

### Provide a support system:

Not everyone will feel comfortable speaking up if there's a problem. Appoint someone as a designated buddy or "office manager" to identify and raise issues with or on behalf of individuals.

# 09. Working offsite



## The barrier

Spaces outside the workplace and usually in public (e.g. music events and tours, film locations, galleries, libraries and museums), add an element of unpredictability and can be particularly challenging for some.

## In real life

### Ang

"Touring is very difficult, you get little sleep and there are different social layers with lots of socialising going on. Different group dynamics and different relationships appear and you are in a new place with new impressions and sometimes even new languages."

“  
The more open we  
are about this the  
more we can make  
things comfortable.  
I genuinely believe  
we’re richer for  
having a broad  
group of people.  
”

Creative employer

## Positive changes

### Assess risk:

Prior to offsite work, ensure individuals have the opportunity to discuss potentially problematic situations with a line manager or mentor.

### Devise solutions:

Anticipate challenges and agree strategies to help individuals cope with problematic scenarios (e.g. quieter locations to which they might go if feeling overwhelmed).

### Tour the location:

Carry out an introductory tour of the location with the individual, ensuring the spaces in which they will be operating are clearly identified.

### Clear directions:

Provide clear, comprehensive directions for navigating and accessing the offsite space well ahead of the first visit. Adjust the format of information to individual preference and consider using visual maps in addition to text or spoken word.

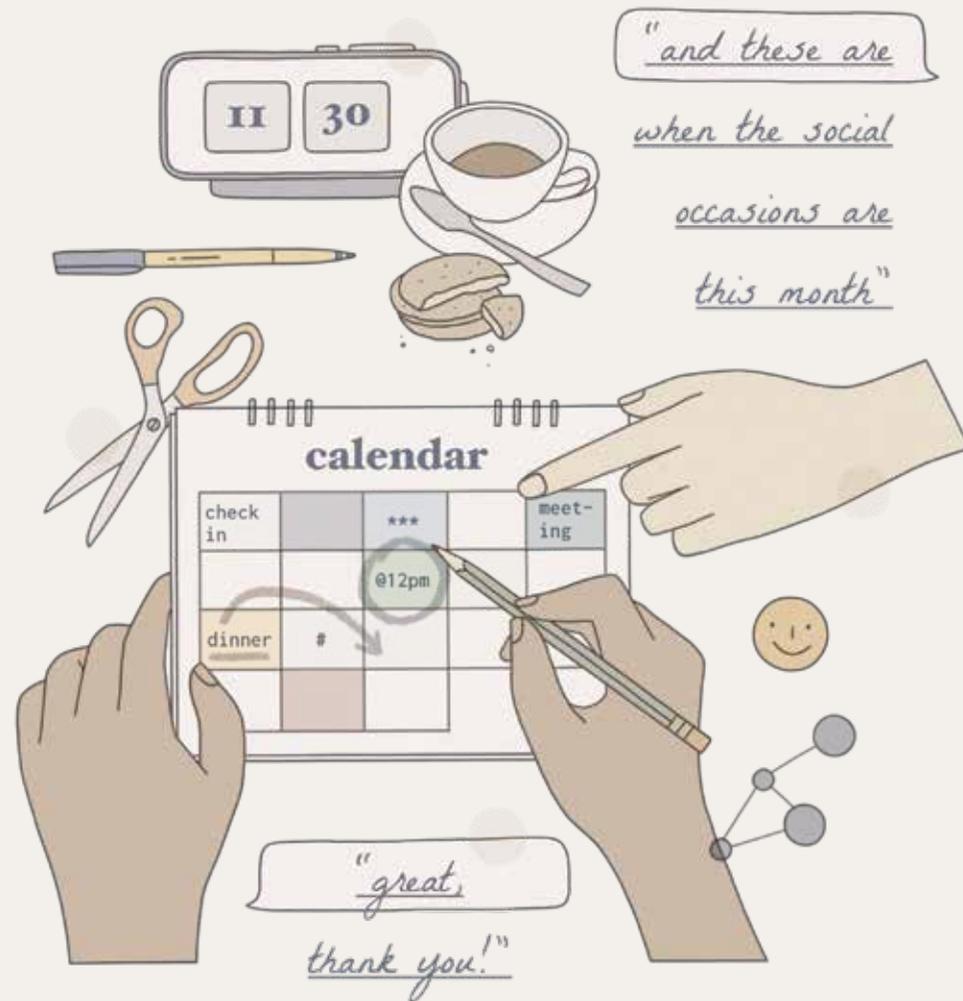
### In case of emergency:

Agree a point of contact for emergency support (e.g. if tics are becoming uncontrollable).

### Maintain relationships:

Where possible, maintain consistent teams and familiar relationships.

# 10. Day-to-day work practices



## The barrier

Certain tasks, situations or skills (such as time management, organisation, socialising, working routines) can be challenging or sometimes impossible for some people to manage – and those who struggle can feel stigmatised.

## In real life

### David

"I can't do timesheets and admin tasks like that. I used to beat myself up over it, especially as people didn't believe me. Now that I have a diagnosis and can explain why I can't do these things my employer has simplified the timesheet inputs. I get help from HR too which makes a big difference."

### Clara

"I don't have a fixed schedule for work. I'll usually work eight hours a day, but I have the freedom to work irregular times if I have a tic attack and I make up any lost time by doing a late night or early morning."

## Positive changes

“

**Each case has to be looked at and worked through together. We understand that everyone is different and we work on a case-by-case basis.**

”

Creative employer

### Support time management skills:

Some people find measuring and making sense of time difficult. This can present specific challenges in the creative sector where deadlines and meetings are a fact of life. To address this:

- Offer optional training or advice on time management, including software (see page 50).
- Encourage individuals who struggle with time management to work with line managers to predict time requirements (e.g. the time required to reach an offsite location).
- Offer training on online prompts or simply a desktop clock so people are not reliant on teammates to provide reminders about meeting times.
- Be clear about deadlines to avoid confusion.

### Support organisational skills:

Some people have difficulty in sequencing and prioritising tasks. To address this:

- Offer optional training, software (see page 50) and advice for anyone who has such needs.
- Encourage individuals who struggle with organisation to work with line managers to predict needs.
- Offer peer support from teammates and fellow ND people who can, for example, provide reminders about prioritising to-do lists.

### Support socialising:

Social aspects of work can be sources of pressure and feel overwhelming to some. To address this:

- Ensure progression does not depend on an individual's ability to form relationships through socialising.
- Ensure a variety of optional social occasions are on offer.
- Offer private support and advice on building relationships with colleagues and clients.



### Support working styles:

The requirement to fit the standard working routine of others can feel disruptive to some, whose optimal working hours may not match your organisation's hours. To address this:

- Make flexible working the norm.
- Agree a preferred and appropriate frequency of regular check-ins to ensure the individual feels supported.
- If the individual agrees, make teammates aware of their routine needs (e.g. weekly coaching) to increase understanding.
- Accommodate different styles of communication.
- Provide equipment such as a laptop so work can be done at home or in a quiet space. Provide supportive software (see page 50).
- Ensure you support different ways of learning.



# Conclusion

“  
**Creativity is sparked  
when humans imagine  
new concepts,  
see new possibilities,  
hear new sounds,  
invent new ways.**  
”

How do we make the most of our creative potential? It's a question that should concern everybody working in our creative industries, whether they're in a highly commercial business or they're funded through public investment. The answer is as relevant to a multinational media conglomerate as it is to a self-employed artist.

To see why it's so important, you only have to imagine a world without creativity. Nothing new would happen; there would be no original ideas; no new inventions or advances in technology; no new products or services; no new music, games, films, books, shows or art.

Creativity is sparked when humans imagine new concepts, see new possibilities, hear new sounds, invent new ways. We should nurture it. We should protect the conditions that allow it to flourish. And, above all, we should cherish the people who make creative things happen in our lives.

Those creative humans are everywhere in our society, but sometimes the opportunity for them to achieve their potential is not. For too long, some people have been handed an unequal deal in the workplace – even when their talent isn't in doubt – simply because they think differently.

Rather than just talking about this problem, the Universal Music team decided to take action. They've been thoughtful and sensitive in the way they've gone about considering the challenge. In producing this handbook, they listened to a lot of advice from experts. But, most importantly, they worked collaboratively with people with lived experiences to ensure that everything here is authentic and useful.

This guide is a powerful moral argument for everyone being able to achieve their personal potential at work; it's also eloquent in making the business case for more inclusive ways of operating. If the advice shared on these pages is adopted across the creative industries, more people will be able to flourish more often in more workplaces. That's good for business, but it's good for our people too, enabling more of us to enjoy the happy and fulfilled lives that we all deserve.

**Dr Darren Henley OBE,  
Chief Executive, Arts Council England**

# Methodology

## Scope and ambition

We wanted to produce a neurodiversity handbook which reflects the voice of ND individuals, to specifically enable employers to create more inclusive and rewarding environments in the creative sector.

## Teams

This handbook and the data and research on which it is based were compiled by:

- Advisory Board: ND individuals with experience of advocacy, working in the creative sector.
- Flamingo, an insight consultancy.
- Utopia, a culture change business focusing on inclusion, purpose and entrepreneurialism.
- Universal Music UK Steering Committee comprising employees, including ND staff, and consultants.

## Qualitative and quantitative

The initial research took place over a six-month period in late 2018 and early 2019 using a series of one-hour interviews based on discussion guides compiled with input from the experts.

### Research format:

#### Understand

We conducted a review of existing work and gathered information from eight ND experts.

#### Pause

A steering group session aligned the formats of the survey and discussion guide and shared emerging themes. Themes were further shared with the Advisory Board for their input.

#### Explore

We arranged face-to-face/phone interviews with seven employers and 14 individuals (employees and freelance) with a range of neurodiverse characteristics, drawn from across the creative sector. The interviews helped us understand their first-hand experiences of trying to find work and working.

#### Pause

The steering group reflected on learnings so far and explored potential solutions to barriers.

#### Evolve

Proposed solutions were reviewed by six employers and five individuals with neurological conditions.

#### Quantitative survey

This was issued to approximately 100 participants. We received 49 survey responses.

#### Peer review

The final results were reviewed by our Advisory Board.

We don't pretend that this document is exhaustive. There's more work to be done and as more organisations gain experience we hope they will share their stories.

Whilst this handbook is designed for employers, there's much here for individuals too. If you have been identified as having, or feel you may have, a cognitive difference, we hope this handbook will help you either whilst looking for work or when you are in employment.



## Acknowledgements

### We would like to thank:

All the ND individuals who generously shared their experiences with us. All the individuals were paid for their time.

The following experts who helped us, particularly at the start of the project:

Jon Adams (Flow Observatorium), Dr. Seonaid Anderson (Tourettes Action), Professor Simon Baron-Cohen (Autism Research Centre, Cambridge University), Dr. Nancy Doyle (Genius Within), Lucy Hobbs (The Future is ND), Neil Milliken (Atos), Becki Morris (Disability Collaborative Network C.I.C./Achievability trustee), Emily Swiatek (National Autistic Society), Richard Todd (Dyspraxia Foundation), Tea Uglow.

All the employers who spoke at length with us and the employers who took the time to complete our survey.

Our Advisory Board: Lucy Hobbs (The Future is ND), Becki Morris (Disability Collaborative Network C.I.C) and Tea Uglow.

Special thanks also to Karen Simmonds, Nadya Powell (Utopia), Matthew Taylor, Tarek Chaudhury, Lydia Crudge (Flamingo), Exceptional Individuals, Rachel Johnson and Rhian Jones.

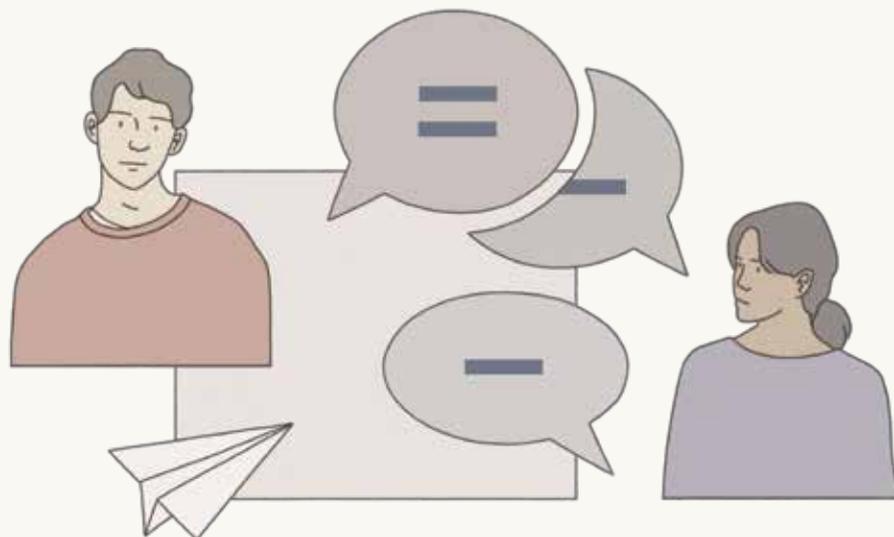
**Our  
neurodiversity  
panel**

## Profiling our contributors

We spoke to ten people drawn from across the creative sector to talk about their neurodiversity. Our panel included:

**Name:** Ang  
**Job:** Musician  
**ND condition:** Autism

Ang was diagnosed with autism in 2009. She works for an orchestra and brings many strengths to her workplace including memory and an eye for detail, incredible focus, a strong sense of duty and reliability, and less unconscious bias. She finds touring very difficult as she struggles with changes in schedule, new places and socialising with new people.



**Name:** Bea  
**Job:** Museum employee  
**ND conditions:** Dyspraxia, dyslexia and dyscalculia

Bea was diagnosed when she was 10 and is waiting for an autism assessment following advice from a university lecturer. After struggling to find employment and losing jobs due to her conditions, she now works for one of the UK's leading museums. She gained visibility in the ND community after setting up a dyspraxia charity which has led to them winning awards. She says this has turned her neurodiversity into a positive talking point.

**Name:** Clara  
**Job:** Advertising executive  
**ND conditions:** Tourette Syndrome and autism

Clara was diagnosed at 22 when her tics became out of control. She says receiving the diagnosis was reassuring in that it made the past make sense. She worried that her ND would affect her employability. She has strong fact-checking skills and an eye for detail – so much so that her internship at a top financial newspaper was extended twice – and she developed a reputation based on her strengths. She feels that her condition affects her proactivity and ability to build rapport easily.

“  
**Everyone struggles to pay attention sometimes but we haven't all got ADHD.**  
”

**Name:** David  
**Job:** Data scientist  
**ND condition:** ADHD

David is deep into his career but was only diagnosed with ADHD two years ago after researching the symptoms online. He had what he calls hyperactivity all his life and felt he didn't fit in anywhere. His diagnosis took time to settle but many members of his family ended up being diagnosed too and he made friends along the way.

“Everyone struggles to pay attention sometimes but we haven't all got ADHD. Think of it in terms of a physical condition: we all get out of breath sometimes but we haven't all got asthma.”

**Name:** Erik  
**Job:** Freelance designer and videographer  
**ND conditions:** Dyslexia and dyscalculia

Erik was diagnosed with dyslexia at the age of 12, and dyscalculia some years later. Constantly having to work longer and harder than everyone else but not willing to accept that he was simply 'stupid' led him to critically analyse how to improve himself, and he now uses art as the key medium to teach himself. He learns particularly fast when listening to podcasts at the same time as drawing.

He is very good with art and all things visual. He is also good with people and at finding their strengths. Erik is open-minded and, due to his situation, has learned how to adapt over time.

**Name:** Faisal  
**Job:** Music consultant  
**ND condition:** Dyscalculia

Faisal was 10 when he was diagnosed, an experience he describes as initially causing panic, but which later gave way to relief. Years later, dyscalculia is no longer the biggest focus of his life and identity. Faisal sees it as negative to portray neurodiverse people as being human machines or having super powers: “In many ways it's degrading.”

Our neurodiversity panel

**Name:** Gaynor  
**Job:** Student and activist  
**ND condition:** Autism

Gaynor is an internationally recognised campaigner and was diagnosed with autism after her bipolar psychiatrist suggested a test. She described her diagnosis as bringing a feeling of relief. She is part of the ND community, as well as LGBTQ+ and mental health communities.



**Name:** Holly  
**Job:** Trainer and coach for creatives  
**ND condition:** ADHD

Holly was diagnosed two years ago. She dislikes that the conversation around neurodiversity is being led by 'experts' who only have qualifications rather than lived experience. For a long time Holly was unaware of her ADHD, and only went to seek a diagnosis after struggling at work.

Our neurodiversity panel

**Name:** Ian  
**Job:** Freelancer and activist  
**ND condition:** ADHD

Diagnosed in 2016, Ian describes the process as being tough. As he found the NHS unsupportive, he eventually went for a private diagnosis. Since then, Ian has been on a journey of understanding, reading up on the topic and benefiting from getting help from the ND community. He has found Twitter and Instagram particularly helpful and supportive.

**Name:** Jules  
**Job:** Artist  
**ND conditions:** Autism, dyslexia and synaesthesia

Jules only received his dyslexia diagnosis aged 39. He was diagnosed with autism at 52 and synaesthesia, a condition that causes the brain to process data in the form of several senses at once, in 2008. Jules says he spent his late 30s living and masking a lie. He feels his neurodiversity gives him an edge in the creative industries and he has lots of transferable skills including pattern finding, solving mysteries, being very loyal, and seeing a lot of detail.

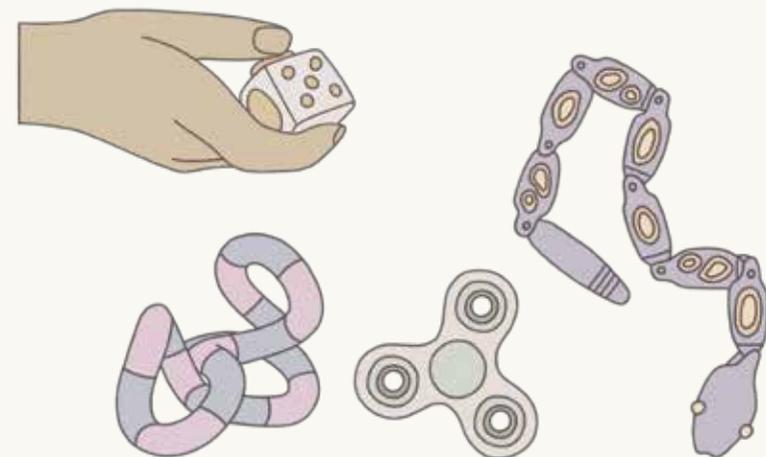
All names have been changed.

# Glossary

NB. as understanding increases, many of the following terms and definitions will continue to evolve. Also it is important to note that intersectionality – having more than one of the conditions listed below – is very common.

## Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

One of the most common neurocognitive variations. Symptoms include hyper focus, difficulty staying focused and paying attention, impulsive or spontaneous behaviour and hyperactivity (over-activity).



## Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD) or Autism

Autism is a lifelong condition that affects how a person communicates with and relates to other people, and how they experience the world around them. Autistic people see, hear and feel the world differently to other people. If you are autistic, you are autistic for life; autism is not an illness or disease and cannot be 'cured'. Often people feel being autistic is a fundamental aspect of their identity.

Autism is a spectrum condition. All autistic people share certain differences and difficulties, but being autistic will affect them in different ways.

Autistic Spectrum Disorder is the diagnostic term used by professionals. Autism is one of the preferred terms used by those with autism.

**Source:** National Autistic Society

## Dyscalculia

Dyscalculia is a condition that affects the ability to acquire arithmetical skills. Dyscalculic learners may have difficulty understanding simple number concepts, lack an intuitive grasp of numbers, and have problems learning number facts and procedures.

**Source:** Dyslexia UK Net

## Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. Characteristic features of dyslexia are difficulties in phonological awareness, verbal memory and verbal processing speed. Dyslexia occurs across the range of intellectual abilities. It is best thought of as a continuum, not a distinct category, and there are no clear cut-off points.

**Source:** British Dyslexia Society

## Dyspraxia

A common form of developmental coordination disorder (DCD) affecting fine and/or gross motor coordination in children and adults. It may also affect speech. DCD is a lifelong condition, formally recognised by international organisations including the World Health Organisation.

**Source:** Dyspraxia Foundation

## Tourette Syndrome

An inherited, neurological condition, the key features of which are tics, involuntary and uncontrollable sounds and movements.

**Source:** Tourettes Action





UNIVERSAL MUSIC UK