

Breaking down barriers – neurodiversity for inclusive leadership

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Abstract

Neurodivergent people function, learn and process information differently through the lens of identity theory. With approximately 15-20% of people being neurodivergent, workplaces and leaders need to find ways to adapt to ensure inclusion of these valuable employees in the workplace. In many instances, an issue of what was said does not match what was heard, resulting in a response that is not the detail being sought, even as early as the interview stage. A change in language and approach is needed. Connecting the value of neurodiversity with communication strategies has the potential to support neurodiversity as an organisational strength for increased business results, a competitive advantage for organisations. Drawing on over 100 survey responses from an online survey to explore the communication challenges faced by people who function with neurodiversity, the aim was to devise a framework for all team members to understand how to best communicate with each other. This framework offers the ability to increase employee engagement through establishing an understanding of a 'way of working' that assists the longevity of neurodivergent people in the workforce and worth leaders embracing to increase inclusion.

Key words: neurodiversity, leadership, inclusion, adapted communication, communication

Introduction

This research came about following the experience of a business professional with over 10 years within academia who was unable to provide the detail anticipated by an interview panel during a job interview. The issue was that what was said did not match what was heard, resulting in a response that was not the detail being sought. Welcome to the mindset of a person functioning with Neurodiversity (ND) and the ever-present struggle this brings when there is no open communication to enable clarity of understanding of one understanding the other. Herein lies the challenge for leaders, no matter what level in the organisation, that there is an unfamiliar logic that is challenging to follow where ND thought concepts are misunderstood which, in turn, undermines the workplace wellbeing of neurodivergent team members (Austin & Pisano 2017; LeFevre-Levy *et al.*, 2023; Rosqvish *et al.*, 2020; Mitra-Kalita, 2023).

Australian sociologist, Judy Singer, coined the term 'neurodiversity' which began drawing attention to the diversity of human minds in her 1997 MA thesis. Her chapter 'Why Can't You be Normal for Once in Your Life?' (Singer, 1999), based on her thesis, defined an era of ND research. Yet the term has only begun to appear in a wider scale in literature more recently (Mitra-Kalita, 2023; LeFevre-Levy *et al.*, 2023; Rosqvish *et al.*, 2020; Bernard *et al.*, 2023; Armstrong, 2015) and including a wider range of ND conditions (IML, 2020a; IML, 2020b). Neurotypical (NT) are people who function and process information as expected by society (Jurgens, 2020). Whereas neurodivergent people function, learn and process information differently. Neurodiversity (ND) refers to the cognitive diversity, the natural range of variation in human neurocognition (Doyle, 2024; Chapman, 2020). ND covers a wide range of diagnoses that also includes Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and also includes 'hidden disabilities' such as Ehlers-Danlos Syndrome (EDS) (Casanova *et al.*, 2020), where approximately 15-20% of people are

neurodivergent and function with ND (Szulc *et al.*, 2023; Fung & Doyle, 2021; Bottema-Beutal *et al.*, 2020; Doyle, 2020; IML, 2020; IML, 2020a; IML, 2020b; Armstrong, 2015).

According to a report by MBTI®, ND is essential to innovation (MBTI, 2024). Although the report states ND is also essential for inclusivity, wider research indicates that inclusivity is the key barrier being faced by neurodivergent employees (Wiggleton-Little & Callender, 2023; Oseland, 2021; IML, 2020; IML, 2020a; IML, 2020b; den Houting, 2019). A key element in the MBTI report is on how organisations 'risk' legal consequences and in utilising an employee's full potential (MBTI, 2024) which aligns with findings that 'managers of neurodiverse employees have no choice but to manage these employees' (Krzeminska *et al.*, 2019, p.459). This is not to excuse but to highlight the very real situation of 'avoiding the complication' resulting in blocking and hindering the progress of ND inclusion within the workplace. This evidences that many who function with ND face challenges in securing employment compared to those who are NT.

Therein lies the basis of this research, that is, enabling leaders to focus on what can be achieved where the fear and intimidation of the legal implications could be a factor that is hindering ND engagement in the workforce. It could be interpreted that managers and Human Resources (HR) avoid the risk of potential legal action through preferring employees who are NT rather than those who function with ND, rather than doing what is right ethically and legally thus avoiding the potential risk of legal action (Krzeminska *et al.*, 2019; Wikström *et al.*, 2011).

Neurodiversity in the workplace

Within recent literature, there appears two main perspectives in relation to ND in the workplace. The need for leadership to be more ND inclusive (Roberson *et al.*, 2021; Morgan, 2018, and the benefits to an organisation of having ND team members as an opportunity to strengthen organisational performance, bringing with them wider creativity, lateral thinking and differing perspectives (LeFevre-Levy *et al.*, 2023; April *et al.*, 2023; Houdek, 2022; IML, 2020; IML, 2020a; IML, 2020b; Matuson, 2019; Morgan, 2018; Bewley & George, 2016). Veli Korkmaz *et al.* (2022) reviewed over 100 articles on inclusive leadership through multiple lenses and identified that there is a gap in research on the predictive value in terms of employee and organisational outcomes. A gap that this research seeks to reduce.

Randel *et al.* (2018) identified five (5) categories of leadership behaviours they suggest would enable an inclusive work environment through 'perceptions of inclusion'. However, considering the terminology, someone functioning with ND may interpret 'perceived' to be insincere from a trust perspective. Research findings support that improving the work experience of all work group members and the effectiveness of their groups as a responsibility of ensuring leadership take an inclusive approach, that indeed all leaders should be adapting their leadership communication to have a positive impact on their teams whether ND or NT (Illingworth & Hiddlestone-Mumford, 2024; Randel *et al.*, 2018). Various legislation across the globe requires organisations to make reasonable adjustments to support employees with disabilities, this includes employees functioning with ND (Doyle, 2020). Adjustments that may benefit all employees and not ND alone includes clearer communication, quiet concentration spaces, and individual needs consideration by management (April *et al.*, 2023; IML, 2020a; IML, 2020b; Morgan, 2018; CIPD, 2018; Turner & Andrew, 2018). Yet research indicates that over half of leaders and managers mistakenly assume incapability, indicating they would not employ someone with neurodivergent condition/s (IML, 2020; IML, 2020a; IML, 2020b). Additionally, of the 1,156 NT and ND respondents of an Institute of Managers and Leaders (IML) survey undertaken in 2019, most indicated that their organisation neither include ND within policies and procedures, nor provide training on inclusion (Turner & Andrew 2018; IML, 2020; IML, 2020a; IML, 2020b).

As stated by LeFevre-Levy *et al.* (2023, p.1) ‘the neuroatypical population has a history of under-[employment] and unemployment, their inclusion in the modern workplace ... and organizations (is) an important dimension of organizational diversity.’ This under-inclusion leaves people functioning with ND as an underutilised and untapped talent, often discriminated against through unconscious bias and misinformation (LeFevre-Levy *et al.*, 2023; Rosqvish *et al.*, 2020; IML, 2020a; IML, 2020b). In turn, these assumptions can cause offence, create impressions of someone not being valued or respected. An area people functioning with ND too often feel the brunt of.

Neurodiversity and Identity Theory

The inclusion of ND within the workplace holds importance when considered through the lens of ‘self-identity’, where the concept of self-identity encompasses our knowledge and understanding of ourselves (Villa *et al.*, 2021; DeNigris *et al.*, 2018). Job identity is where individuals construct identity through either having a job or attaining a particular job level impacting on self-identity (Koretz, 2019; Ma & Peng, 2019; Villa *et al.*, 2021).

Job identity has a strong impact on self-definition and personal well-being, for example, a worker doing a specific job role, whereas the social facet consists of the strength of identifications with social groups, such as the work team and the organisation as a whole (Crocetti *et al.*, 2016, p.282). So too, ‘work ... give[s] social legitimacy’ where acceptance by others is part of the process of forming ‘self-identity’ (Fryers, 2006, p.2) and that self-identity within the workplace can be enmeshed with neurodiversity as an identity (Anderson-Chavarria, 2022). Organisations such ‘Ministry of Justice (MOJ) UK’ have established ‘Autism Support Groups’ and ‘Neurodivergent Groups’ which endorse a condition itself becoming the identity (DeNigris *et al.*, 2018; Fryers, 2006). It is imperative to note that labelling of ND in the workplace does not provide self-identity but does create a workplace recognition of identifying ND functioning employees and thus opens the communication channels.

The term neurodiversity (ND) (Singer, 2016, 2017) has developed to become a social movement pushing for autism awareness and rights along with identity for autistic individuals (Baron-Cohen, 2017; Forber-Pratt *et al.*, 2017; Leadbitter *et al.*, 2021). From a management and HR perspective this can be quite overwhelming and possibly intimidating.

Neurodiversity and HR

Within a work environment, for all employees there are two key focal points of authority and advice right from the beginning of the recruitment process through to integration into the organisation, these being the line manager and HR. When this is considered in the context of the HR Business Partner Model (Ulrich, 2009) which is becoming increasingly adopted, where HR transforms to being an internal consultant approach to support line manager with the devolution of HR responsibilities (Tamayo-Verleene *et al.*, 2018), this may account for the hesitation for ND inclusion. HR itself features in research that identifies employee performance as a direct link to employee integrity (Konadu *et al.*, 2023; Andayani & Lanin, 2022; Rosmi & Syamsir, 2020) where ND was explored as a competitive advantage by Austin and Pisano (2017). It appears, however, that the focus of unleashing performance and engaging integrity is yet to be fully explored in relation to unleashing the full potential of those who function with ND/hidden disability within the workforce in the context of leadership responsibility, and even obligation consider managers are taking on HR responsibilities. So too, this would present as an opportunity for all business schools to integrate awareness and support within programmes such as MBA and MA HRM to enable positive change in leadership and HR views of ND in the workplace. An internet search indicates limited offering that focus on ND in the workplace, one notable more comprehensive offering is found at The

Ivey Academy in Canada. It is recommended that more business schools consider such programmes.

Hennekam and Follmer (2024), and Negt and Haunschild (2024), have published practice-base reviews, finding that some organisations have policies and practices in place to 'include' neurodivergent individuals. However, it appears that Negt and Haunschild's (2024) study was in support of HR in the form of a policy rather than in support of the employees functioning with ND as a process. Negt and Haunschild (2024) published a systematic literature review on the topic of the gap between research and practice, identifying that literature tends to either critique HR practitioners or be conceptually driven. This research will take the angle of raising the deficiencies in literature from the employee functioning with ND perspective in the context of leadership development to unleash the full capabilities of ND team members.

Aligning the context of HR as a line manager responsibility, whilst being held accountable for meeting organisational objectives, it would be safe to consider the intense pressures on line managers of 'getting it right', especially in the context of ND and hidden disabilities (Blayney *et al.*, 2020; Bos-Nehles *et al.*, 2020; Kehoe & Han, 2020).

When considering the overwhelming range of 'hidden disabilities', of which ND functioning is considered one, the pressure on managers/leaders in the workplace, along with negative perceptions of disability inclusion, whether visible or hidden, is an area that requires urgent attention and support through ND awareness training. The negative perception holds fear in the workplace, where disability is perceived as a deficit (Marshall *et al.*, 2020). Laws are designed, in theory, to protect a person with a disability. However, it appears that many with disabilities 'fear' losing their jobs should they disclose their condition or ask for 'workplace adjustments' (Norstedt, 2019). Of 1,156 NT and ND staff surveyed in 2019, only half of the employees functioning with ND indicated employers actively sought out whether they needed workplace adjustments compared to 74% of NT who assumed employers asked (IML, 2020a; IML, 2020b). An issue also highlighted in Davies *et al.*'s (2022) findings, where the views of 181 autistic adults around requesting and receiving workplace adjustments were analysed, noting that although considered important, few received needed workplace adjustments, impacting their ongoing employment.

In many cases the accommodations and challenges are manageable, and the potential returns are great. But, to realise the benefits, most organisations would have to 'adjust their recruitment, selection, and career development policies to reflect a broader definition of talent' (Austin & Pisano, 2017, p.97). So too, Palipana (2022, p. 165) notes that '(d)isability (doesn't) mean inability'.

It is important that HR support line managers, that managers have the pragmatic understanding of adapting their communication style whilst being conscious of the ever-ready 'threat' of legal action if they happen to 'get it wrong' (Syahri, 2020). Fears of retribution relate to employees functioning with ND raising issues or requests. Whilst for leaders, the fear of legal action as retribution by an employee is a very 'real' fear where comments such as 'slamming someone in court' for doing something wrong presents as the only communication method rather than an open, dialogue to solve and rectify issues before reaching the point of taking legal action.

Omadeke (2022) showed that 'the best leaders aren't afraid to be vulnerable', yet in the lead up to this research, one of the authors presented the table of communication/ND misinterpretation (Table 2) on behalf of an applicant to a leading academic organisation, requesting an opportunity to re-present based on having a clearer understanding of what

was expected but not specified. This academic institution, purporting to have 'high emotional intelligence' and MBTI experts failed to consider a compromise, one solution being to allow the applicant functioning with ND to re-present in a more NT way. Instead, the request was rejected, contrary to their purported public persona. When considering the time and resource funding for interviewing, why would an interviewer not ensure candidates shortlisted for interview have all the information needed in order to deliver to their best? Szulc (2023), and Scheiner and Bogden (2021) support that with awareness, it is possible for an employer / potential employer to adapt the interview process, including the question format to ensure ND interviewees are considered.

Samosh (2021) raises the fear of employees asking for or even losing workplace adjustments. It would be safe to interpret that the psychological pressure adds to the complexity of neurological processing that employees functioning with ND are coping with on a daily basis. This then raises the question as to what is needed of the leaders to make the workplace ND inclusive and adaptation of communication to ensure all team members function and deliver their best? Casanova *et al.* (2020) found a relationship between Ehlers-Danlos Syndromes (EDS) and Autism. Autism itself is found within literature and validated as a person who functions with ND. Where Baeza-Velasco (2021) specifically explored ND in the context of hypermobility spectrum disorders and EDS, giving a different perspective. It is understandable that the concept of leaders, and potentially HR too, are afraid of the daunting range of disabilities and their various impacts on a person in the workplace. Although it can be argued that it would be 'easier' to avoid rather than to facilitate open discussion and trust building, despite many countries having Disability Discrimination Acts in place. The Equity and Human Rights Commission (2020) defines the UK Equality Act 2010 as 'you must not be discriminated against because: you have a disability, someone thinks you have a disability, and/or you are connected to someone with a disability'. Most organisations across the globe do have a 'Disability Discrimination Policy' and/or 'Equal Opportunity Policy' which is supported by Employment Laws, however, the integrity of those policies comes under scrutiny when aligned to the statistics of trying to secure meaningful employment. There is concern that '(a)ttitudes... are the biggest barriers to achieving things' (Palipana (2022, p. 138).

Leadership Communication and Fear

These perspectives around fear and inclusion support the context that there is a logic if managers are afraid and employees functioning with ND are afraid, then a negative and reactive energy to any interaction (i.e., defensive behaviour) is created, which may or may not result in legal action against the manager (Kirkham, 2023). Leaders influence employee behaviour (Lebel, 2016). According to Kish-Gephart *et al.* (2009) although employees have the potential to 'speak up', they often remain silent out of fear of negative consequences. Fear is 'a powerful and pervasive emotion, [that] influences human perception, cognition, and behaviour' (Kish-Gephart *et al.*, 2009, p.185). Milliken *et al.* (2003) reinforces this view in considering that employees fear that their manager will react negatively if they speak up. While Detert and Burris (2007) further this in viewing that 'subordinate perceptions' influence whether they speak up or not.

Fear creates barriers to performance. Prabowo *et al.* (2018) found that employees can be more inventive without fearing a reprimand by superiors, whether management or HR, when disclosing their ND or raising the discussion of reasonable adjustments. This fear can even hinder the recruitment process, potentially depriving the organisation of a capable – even high performing employee – through fear of disclosing their condition, fear of negative judgement overshadowing their skillset and experience. Fear, and fear-based thinking can paralyse people, creating a psychological barrier that prevents them from moving out of their comfort zone and using a social mask as protection (Cook *et al.*, 2024; Pryke-Hobbes *et al.*,

2023; Leyshon & Hiddlestone-Mumford, 2023). Although it may be daunting, it is clearly more so for the employee in 'risking' raising awareness or asking for modification to enable them to function at their most efficient in the workplace.

So, what is it that employees functioning with ND are wanting from their line manager? How do they allay the fear of speaking up? and, How can the organisation support increased adaptability for all individuals? These are areas of increasing interest to this research, where organisations can harness the best of all employees in a safe environment.

Developing Trust in the Workplace

Adding to the complexity of being a leader, trust is found to act as an important buffer against negative workplace experiences (Bligh, 2017). Legood *et al.* (2021) examined the relationship between leadership styles and trust with a focus on trust building performance levels. While Khattak *et al.* (2020) determined that trust in the leader mediates efforts of continuous improvements. According to Lewis (2022) a '... high-trust organization is one in which employees feel safe to take risks, express themselves freely, and innovate ... where trust is defined as a belief in the abilities ... and character of another person'. This perspective of trust appears in recent research, where trust is the foundation of most successful organisations (Frei & Morris, 2020).

Murray *et al.* (2023) examined autism through self-experience, noting that 'intervention practice' required further research and that there is a common basic need for trust and reliability in interactions. This offers the context of incorporating this research of ND in the workplace through the lens of the Trust Model/Trust Theory in relation to the relationship between an employee and their line manager. An area where communication is a foundation to trust. IML (2020b) highlighted that only 28% of respondents to their survey knew of having colleagues functioning with ND, with a further 35% believing they had undisclosed colleagues functioning with ND. This supports the concerns and fear of disclosure, and IML's (2020b) finding of half of those surveyed indicating they would not employ a person functioning with ND; and that only 30% of organisations having policies and procedures on inclusion/diversity. With 15%-20% of people being neurodivergent, there is a clear gap in understanding and awareness.

Leadership from a Neurodiverse Perspective

As a starting point, what employees functioning with ND want from their line manager is an area that requires investigation and further research, as, according to Roberson *et al.* (2021, p.399) '...management scholars have yet to develop theories and models that are inclusive of neurodiversity. Using the critical disability theory as a lens for reframing assumptions about leadership behavior as described in existing theory and research, we postulate that neurodiversity may serve as a cognitive strength from which leadership derives'.

ND is a workplace issue as much as a community issue. Szulc *et al.* (2023) considered individuals functioning with ND felt vulnerable, where 'lack of understanding by others were found to be particularly burdensome to neurodivergent individuals' (p.1678), with their research focussing on 'enabling HR professionals to learn more about supporting neurodiversity at work' (p.1684). Hartman *et al.* (2023) considered the benefit of employing staff functioning with ND and the positive impact of organisational culture, where 'autistic employees may foster opportunities to improve organizational performance, leading to the development of a more adaptive, high performing, and ethical culture' (p.1989). Despite the unique strengths that employees functioning with ND offer, unemployment rates for those with autism are alarmingly high, reaching up to 90% (Gamulin, 2023, discussing the research of Hartman *et al.*, 2023).

Considering performance through communication, Judd and McKinnon (2021) explored the role of communication for inclusion and participation. They, along with Silver *et al.* (2023) and Volpone *et al.* (2022), connected the value of ND with communication strategies in supporting a business case for ND as an organisational strength for increased business results. Thereby making ND a mechanism for competitive advantage through accommodating ND as an opportunity for all organisations (Ott *et al.*, 2022).

Although MBTI® appears predominantly a recruitment selection tool (Malik *et al.*, 2023) there does appear a connection with ND and MBTI as a communication relationship within literature (Wiggleton-Little & Callender, 2023; Hurley-Hanson & Giannantonio, 2022; Saif, 2022). Within minimal academic resources, a link is shown between the need to adapt communication techniques to engage with those who function with ND through other online ND focussed resources (Taylor, 2023; Taylor *et al.*, 2022; Pahl, 2022). Seitz and Smith (2016) highlight the need for organisations to accommodate autism spectrum disorder (ASD) through direct communication, greater flexibility and understanding. It is the directness of communication that aid adaptation to the work environment and enhances productivity through greater understanding of what is needed.

However, Roberson *et al.*'s (2021) research on leaders who are neurodivergent indicate that '[a]s a result, management scholars have yet to develop theories and models that are inclusive of neurodiversity' (p. 399). Roberson *et al.* (2021) offered a conceptual model that articulates how cognitive characteristics associated with ND may lead to task-based leadership behaviour and traced the influence of such behaviours on leader and follower outcomes, as shown in the conceptual model of Figure 1.

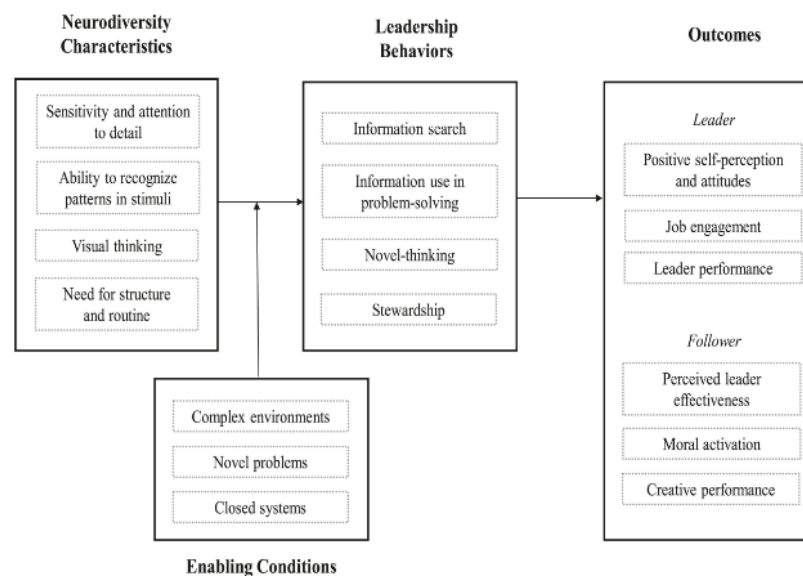


Figure 1. Conceptual model of neurodiversity characteristics, leader behaviours, and outcomes (Roberson *et al.*, 2021, p.149)

Roberson *et al.*'s (2021) research is supported by the research of Seitz (2022) who examined whether traditional leadership theories function from a ND context. Where Seitz (2022) interlinked literature to act as a mediator approach, offering practical concepts in an aim to assist a leader managing ND in the team, whilst also applicable to the leader functioning with ND in understanding how to adapt and understand without the need to mask. Another consideration is masking in the context of ND, which is defined as changing of normal 'natural' behaviour patterns to try to integrate as a NT person (Evans *et al.*, 2023; Radulski, 2022; Miller *et al.*, 2021; Pearson & Rees, 2021).

Design/Methodology

The design of this research was as a survey in order to have a wide reach of respondents who are either formally or informally diagnosed as functioning with ND. The survey format enabled snowballing as a management technique for sharing amongst wider networks and support groups without specifically targeting one country, organisation, or business sector. The purpose of this approach was to ensure the focus was on the detail produced by the findings and develop useful insights for leaders to better understand how to operate an environment that is ND inclusive and supportive.

When looking to do research that involves ND, Le Cunff *et al.* (2023) advocate for an inclusive approach to research that involves people functioning with ND in meaningful roles as a 'requirement of excellence'. This research looks to expose the contribution that a ND workforce can bring, with some adaptations by management to enable open discussions, to unleash the full potential of the whole team with a focus on ensuring ND inclusivity.

Key elements were to use rating scales, questions directly related as a personal connection to the topic being explored, and to cater for written responses. Therefore, it was decided to use Qualtrics to analyse relationship data on selected themes and develop an online survey, where the draft survey questions were reviewed from a number of different ND views and processing approaches (Jenson *et al.*, 2023; Azevedo *et al.*, 2022; Dwyer, 2022; Fletcher-Watson, 2021). All feedback was actioned to ensure the survey was not over stimulating, resulting in disengagement.

Ethical considerations

Guidance was determined from extant literature to ensure ethical inclusion of autistic adults (Bernard *et al.*, 2023; Gowen *et al.*, 2019; Nicolaidis *et al.*, 2019) with specific consideration in the use of an online survey that offered the authors access to a wide range of specific ND potential respondents within ND forums, thereby offering a greater representation in the data collected (Wright, 2005; Garton *et al.*, 1999; Wellman, 1997). This approach is further supported by Ritzman and Subramanian (2024), who found that ND participants enjoyed using computer communication technology, which was integrated through the use of the online survey.

The data collection survey has a clear introduction, stating the intended purpose and use of the information gathered, where respondents could opt out at any point prior to reaching the final submission of their response at the end of the survey. Anticipated to reach over 2,000 potential respondents via a range of ND online forums and professional networks, prior approval of the online forum group mediators was gained. The anticipated level of completed responses is expected to exceed 300, providing the basis for meaningful analysis.

Respondents have access to the researchers via email and/or Research Gate to follow the results and paper generated from their responses. The survey was developed using Qualtrics which offers the ability to analyse relationship data on selected themes. Anonymity was ensured through selecting that all results are anonymous with no identifying questions nor recording of IP address used for the survey, which was a feature of deciding to use Qualtrics.

Findings and discussion

Findings show that employees functioning with ND would like their line managers to have an awareness or basic understanding, that they do not expect their line manager to have full lived experience of ND, however some communication adaptations, and openness to work together would be supportive. Findings also show that employees functioning with ND tend to leave a job when bored, so it is a line manager responsibility to keep an open, non-

judgemental discourse if an employee functioning with ND says ‘point blank’ that they are bored. Line managers are encouraged to ask and work with the employee functioning with ND to find ways to keep them in and engaged in the organisation. Data shows that employees functioning with ND have the capacity to stay in an organisation for over five years. However, the pressure is on line managers to maximise the energy and capability of their ND team members. A selection of comments provided in the free text section of ‘*What top 2 suggestions would you give to help a leader to be more ND inclusive?*’ (Q24).

- Check-in in a genuinely supportive way.
- Encourage and offer support. If someone is struggling, support by checking in with someone and allowing them to be honest.
- Support by asking the person what will help, they will come up with a solution-based option and sense you're being genuine.
- Understand that our health can fluctuate, but with some support, we can do a lot better and do incredible work.
- It would be stimulating and interesting, leadership that encourages me to be myself yet provides me with regular check ins and reassurance, and clear directions.

One respondent eloquently wrote:

Be vocally offering common accommodations so that all staff see it and feel safe to negotiate for the accommodations they need. eg: we've been at this meeting for a while, anyone need a stretch break or a fidget toy? Tuesdays are low stim day in the office, please use your headphones and keep lights lowered.

So too, this applies in contra-sense of a manager functioning with ND who may be struggling to manage a team, particularly NT, in ensuring a mutual approach and respect of the effort both ‘sides’ are putting in to make the working relationship effective and focussed on understanding how to work best together to deliver maximum results. Tensions could build up as an employee functioning with ND tends to find it ‘extremely uncomfortable’ to ask for needed adjustments in the workplace. IML (2020a) asked whether reasonable adjustments were made for employees functioning with ND, with 14% to 25% of NT employees agreeing in their research explored from a practical NT-driven approach. Findings reinforced in Davies *et al.*’s (2022) research on workplace adjustments for autistic employees.

Of the question ‘*How comfortable is it for you to discuss and/or ask for the adjustments you need in the workplace?*’ (Q25) (Figure 2), 40.7% were extremely uncomfortable and a further 23.5% somewhat uncomfortable in discussing adjustments needed, as opposed to only 6.2% being extremely comfortable, and 19.8% somewhat comfortable. This comfort level aligns to the IML (2020a) and IML (2020b) findings, and Davies *et al.*’s (2022) of reasonable adjustments being made. These findings support the need for line managers and HR in encouraging open discussion. From the survey one respondent noted:

Our staff complain a lot about gender diversity, ND students & essentially anything slightly outside of the 'norm'. I do not want to be another thing for them to complain about as I really just want to be able to do my job without having to deal with horrible people's judgements.

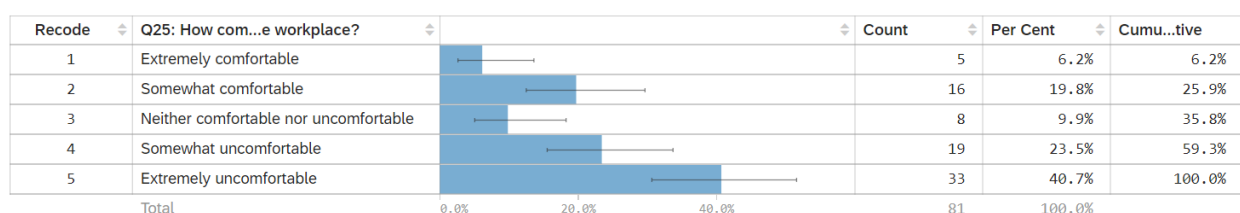


Figure 2. Comfort in discussing or asking for adjustments needed in the workplace

What is clear from the data collected is employees functioning with ND desire a long and positive workplace experience, with the fear of talking to HR showing in being the lowest figures of who employees functioning with ND speak to in the workplace when responding to 'who'. with the majority telling either no-one or a colleague they trust to keep it confidential. Of the results (Figure 3), only 20% felt comfortable telling their line manager and only 5.9% felt comfortable telling HR about their ND requirements. This is supported by the free text entries (Table 1) in Q19 of the survey examining: *'In relation to disclosing your neurodiversity at work, who do you feel most comfortable telling?'*

Table 1. Disclosing neurodiversity at work

Sector	Respondent comment
Education	- I'm not able to let HR know. I've been told that the DfE have taken some "ND authority to teach" when they were honest about their diagnosis's. - I provided a letter to HR and they blasted down the chain so now everyone knows and they have harassing me...I didn't want them to know and they told everyone. - I have disclosed to my line manager as I had no choice when accessing work place adjustments but only after feeling out their attitude towards ND. I have not disclosed to HR or to my colleagues, including ones I trust. - When Occ Health Doctor confirmed that I had a 'hidden disability' – within 2 months I was managed out of the School and apparently blacklisted as being 'trouble'. This was only because I needed to use disabled facilities onsite and large team meetings were torture so having 1 earplug in was rude apparently!
Government	- I currently have disclosed to my line manager but not HR. - I shared with HR and other management because I felt like I had no choice. - I was a Senior lawyer in State Gvt prior to being forced to medically retire, 55, due to chronic illnesses/ issues arising from EDS, forced due to being off work too often.
Corporate	I avoid telling HR, as it I haven't needed assistance from HR. I would like to keep it off my record, as I feel they might misuse it.

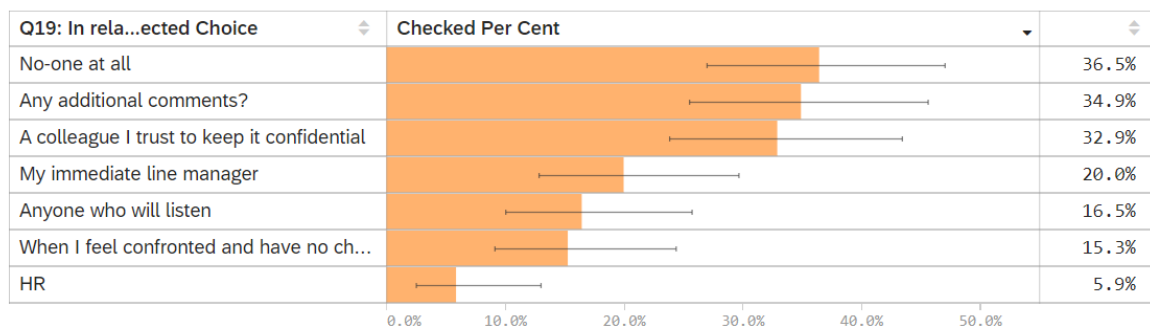


Figure 3. Comfort in disclosing neurodiversity

When asking *'At your most recent (or current) workplace, who knows of your neurodiversity?'* (Q22), according to the data, HR are the least approached by the ND employee (Figure 4).

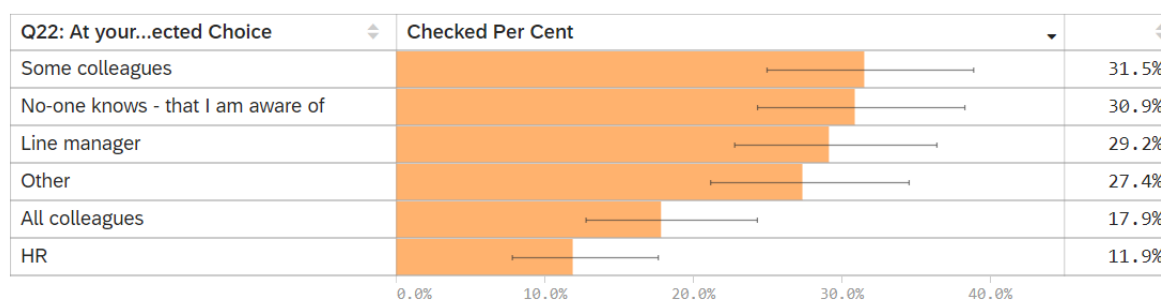


Figure 4. Knowledge of neurodiversity

When examining age group differences and reaction to *‘trying continually to understand what your line manager was asking of you...’* (Q17), results show that the over 35 age group reported seeking further clarification whilst 53.8% of respondents would ‘give up trying and leave the job’. According to one respondent:

When a worker devises a more efficient way of achieving an equivalent or superior outcome, please be open and supportive in considering of implementing this.

What employees functioning with ND require is the capability to seek further clarification – bearing in mind, people functioning with ND have a lifetime experience of being misunderstood yet persevere and want to get it right. So, they need line managers to allow them a second chance once they understand what is being sought but not delivered, which forms the basis of the recommended framework to open those discussions and learning how to function together. Refer Table 2 and Figure 5a below, where 65.1% of respondents desire, need, want line managers to allow them to probe with further questions to be able to process the requirements/task. This then enables employees functioning with ND the possibility to process the intended meaning and thus adjust their response with clearer understanding. Of that 65.1%, when split demographically, 66% of women, 100% on no-binary, 54.2% of males and 100% of those who prefer not to say wanted line managers to allow them to probe further (Figure 5b). When considering age split, 100% of 18-24 years, 77.8% of 25-34 years, 71.4% of 35-44 years, 66.7% of 45-54 years and 45% of 55-64 years all wanted the opportunity to probe line managers further (Figure 5c). One respondent reflected from a perspective of creating a more inclusive team in an adapted communication style:

Be willing to shift or shuffle employees around at their request... in order to get the best person doing each job... for mentoring, don't just keep making the poor performer "improve" that job, just switch them to where their strength lies. Almost no bosses do this really, but it is such an overlooked way to maximize your human resources.

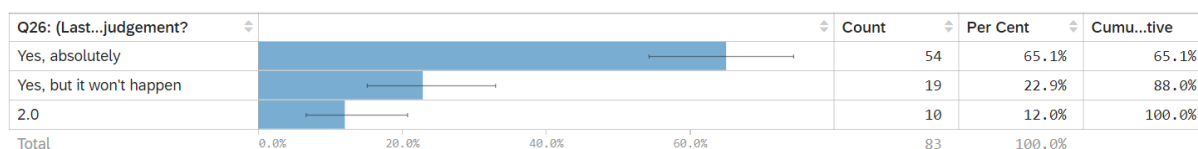


Figure 5a. Allowing an employee functioning with ND to ask for clarification

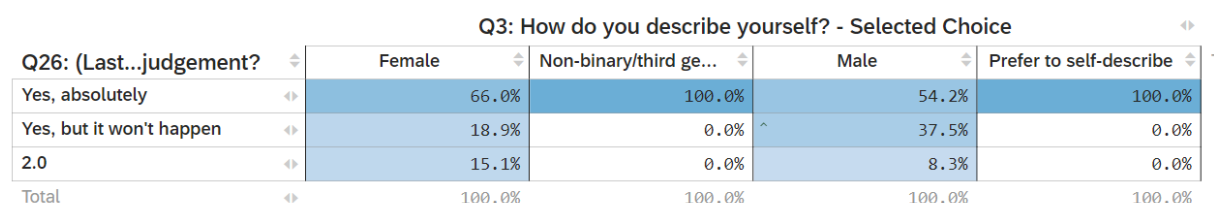


Figure 5b. Allowing an employee functioning with ND to ask for clarification by self-description

Q2: How old are you?

Q26: (Last...judgement?	18-24 years old	25-34 years old	35-44 years old	45-54 years old	55-64 years old
Yes, absolutely	100.0%	77.8%	71.4%	66.7%	45.0%
Yes, but it won't happen	0.0%	11.1%	14.3%	25.0%	40.0%
2.0	0.0%	11.1%	14.3%	8.3%	15.0%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

Figure 5c. Allowing an employee functioning with ND to ask for clarification by age group

Evidenced in the data is an age trend, where younger employees (18-24 years old) do not feel comfortable discussing with HR nor their line manager, where the most likely age-group to discuss their ND with either line manager and/or HR are those in the 35-44 years old age group.

Although neurodiversity initially referred to autism, it has expanded to encompass many neurological disorders (Chapman, 2020; Doyle, 2024). These neurodivergent conditions include ADHD, ASD, EDS, Dyscalculia, Bipolar Disorder, Developmental Dyspraxia, Dyslexia, Tourette Syndrome, and other neurological disorders, to name a few (Casanova *et al.*, 2020; Singer, 2016, 2017; Jaarsma & Welin, 2012; Fenton & Krahn, 2007).

Interpretation of Figure 6 and Figure 7 is that ND employees are not comfortable in raising their ND functioning with neither their line manager nor HR. This evidences that there is a need for managers to have empathy to enable the ND employee to discuss the best ways-of-working, including reasonable adjustments as the issue is not an age nor gender differential. For HR the results evidence a lack of trust in sharing ND status and any adjustments, and whether a policy is in place or not, inclusion is more tangible through actions to support managers leading ND within their teams.

18-24 years old	HR	0.0%	
25-34 years old	HR	1.9%	
35-44 years old	HR	3.1%	
45-54 years old	HR	0.0%	
55-64 years old	HR	1.9%	
65+ years old	HR	0.0%	
18-24 years old	My immediate line manager	0.0%	
25-34 years old	My immediate line manager	5.0%	
35-44 years old	My immediate line manager	6.9%	
45-54 years old	My immediate line manager	4.4%	
55-64 years old	My immediate line manager	3.8%	
65+ years old	My immediate line manager	0.6%	

Figure 6. Comfort in raising ND with line manager and HR by age group

So too gender appeared to reflect that HR was lowest rating for an ND employee to approach in comparison to those who raised their ND with their line manager (Figure 7).

Female	(110)	HR	8 of 110	7.3%	
Non-binary/third gender	(12)	HR	1 of 12	8.3%	
Male	(41)	HR	3 of 41	7.3%	
Prefer to self-describe	(3)	HR	0 of 3	0.0%	
Prefer not to say	(1)	HR	0 of 1	0.0%	
Female	(110)	My immediate line manager	25 of 110	22.7%	
Non-binary/third gender	(12)	My immediate line manager	4 of 12	33.3%	
Male	(41)	My immediate line manager	6 of 41	14.6%	
Prefer to self-describe	(3)	My immediate line manager	1 of 3	33.3%	
Prefer not to say	(1)	My immediate line manager	0 of 1	0.0%	

Figure 7. Comfort in raising ND with line manager and HR by gender

From these two questions, respondents provided their views on the reaction to disclosure to HR and line managers:

- Don't change how you interact with us after you find out we're ND. As in, don't suddenly talk down to us or speak slower or like we're children. But do be more patient and understand that most of us work really hard to be successful.
- Managers must be willing to learn and adapt and try to be kind and understanding about it. If they don't know or care and don't want to know how they can support you best then that is awful and they should not be a manager.
- I think Managers should understand the benefits of ND and be empowered to support ND people so they and the business can thrive.
- The job itself was okay but very underappreciated for the value added outside of my contracted responsibilities.

When asked what the respondent wanted their manager to know, concerns were indicated around:

- Masking to change perceived identity as NT when ND – job/self-identity.
- They would not understand how challenging it is to mask and appear like a NT. They just wouldn't understand.
- my neurodivergent belief that giving 100% is a literal expectation.

Interpretation of data

It would be understandable that from a leader or manager's perspective, a team member stating 'I have Autism' for example, or 'function with neurodiversity', through to others with demanding adjustments due to a 'hidden disability' such as EDS, to feeling somewhat overwhelmed and maybe even intimidated as to what is expected of them, both as a leader and legally.

The survey was sent out to explore and reassure leaders that they are not expected to have a full and thorough understanding of every condition that impacts on neurological processing. However, what is clear is that people functioning with ND desire to succeed in the workplace, to be able to communicate with their leader in order to ensure understanding of miscommunication taking place in order to achieve a way of working together, a mutual understanding. Additional text responses from the survey offer the following suggestion and insights to leaders and managers.

- Be vocally offering common accommodations so that all staff see it and feel safe to negotiate for the accommodations they need. eg: we've been at this meeting for a while, anyone need a stretch break or a fidget toy?
- Ask the person what they need. Everyone is different.
- Topic introduced prior to discussion (eg: meeting set with topic outlined and ideally an agenda / discussion points), question posed with ability to ask clarifying questions, ideally seeing question in writing. For some the preference might be a recording I guess. Also - not being required to answer in front of everyone - particularly without preparation.
- Clarify individual needs and don't expect a person with x diagnosis requires the same supports as others with the same diagnosis.
- I have had to disclose to get the adjustments I need on occasions Give choice - most things that make life better for an ND also do for a NT.
- Be curious and open to learn, the person can teach you how to get the best out of them. No different to any other employee.

Based on these results, Table 2 below is proposed as a framework for all team members to understand how best to communicate with each other, resulting in increased employee engagement and longevity of people functioning with ND within the workforce.

Model to guide Open ND Communication

Developed, as an outcome of literature and the data, it is clear that all parties want to have an effective working relationship in the workplace. To have a support guide to keep the focus on the areas of miscommunication between NT and ND, rather than it being an issue on a personal level, is proposed in the Table 2 framework below. The framework establishes the basis for discussion, aiding the participants to open the communication channel by exploring an understanding of what was asked or said, what was heard, what was answered in response to what was heard, and what was actually being sought by the line manager/other person to overcome ND communication barriers. Through greater understanding, an improved and more productive work environment is achievable, harnessing the benefits of employees functioning with ND.

Table 2. Talking it through: Understanding and Overcoming ND Communication Barriers Framework

What was asked/ said	What was heard	What was answered	What was being sought

(Illingworth, 2024)

This table was found to be effective when used by a ND person in having a non-emotive discussion to clear what and how communication was being misunderstood. This helps the leader/manager as it is person specific communication, developing a 'way of working' as best practice. The table was not considered constructive when used by a NT person trying to have the ND discussion, as it was considered as 'NT reinforcing the non-inclusion by trying to coax ND to being NT', where non-inclusion and non-acceptance have a negative impact on self-identity (Cage *et al.*, 2018; Cooper *et al.*, 2017).

Contribution to knowledge

This paper contributes to knowledge both academically and for practitioners in reducing the apprehension managers face when managing a team member who functions with ND. As the increase of diagnoses, both formal and informal, along with the wide range of formal ND, it is understandable that the topic of managing ND in the workplace can be daunting, even for the most experienced manager.

This paper offers a framework to open the discussions and establish an understanding of communication complexity for ND functioning in the workplace. The intended result is that leaders and employees who function with ND or who are leaders functioning with ND remain in the workforce and have a positive and supportive experience in doing so.

The focus of this research is in offering supportive and constructive insights for leaders whether as someone who functions with ND or has team member/s who function with ND. Thus, this research entwines ND as own identities in the context of self-identity as a workplace consideration.

Future research

With so much more that can be explored in ND and associated communication, further research is needed on how communication can change to create greater inclusion across all people functioning with ND. Therein, increase employability through greater understanding and willingness to adjust the workplace to increase inclusion. Further collection of survey response continues and nuances in responses will be analysed, along with the variability between NT and ND interpretation of prevalence of inclusion and adjustments.

Further research could also focus on the HR perspective as to where HR could address the issues being faced by ND employees and future employees through the lens of job identity and self-identity.

Conclusion

Results of this research evidence that ND respondents are not expecting managers to have detailed knowledge of all ND functions and hidden disabilities, where 43.1% of respondents expected managers to have an 'awareness and basic understanding', with a further 18.8% not expecting line managers to have a full understanding of all ND implications and needs.

Interpreting these results of ND expectations in relation to desiring an awareness of ND complexities evidence that ND employees are wanting managers, leaders and HR to have the open conversations, to work together in developing an inclusive work environment where the ND can flourish and deliver business results.

Though this is progress, the fear of inclusion, whether disability, hidden disability and/or ND, increases the pressures on managers who may become daunted and intimidated by the laws in place should they 'get it wrong'. Considering the low ranking of HR being aware or advised of a person's ND functioning and 'hidden disability' requirements, this leaves managers in a situation many prefer to avoid through non-employment/non-inclusion of ND team members/employees.

Where we find leaders who function with ND, the complexities continue. However, it appeared as more-so that NT team members did not understand the level of effort put in by the ND leader nor understand the impact ND has on the leader's communication efforts.

What is found in literature supports that an ND leader can be more effective as a result of 'social identity' within the ND networks such as the 'autism group' (Beck, 2023; Greco *et al.*, 2022; Steffens *et al.*, 2021). This is not to say that being ND will make one a better leader, it does however highlight the importance of engaging employees in having confidence in leadership integrity when dealing with discussions surrounding complexities faced by ND employees.

What this research has found, to support managers, is that success and integration of ND employees relies upon managers to adapt their approach in order to allow the ND to be a positively contributing as a team member, resulting in a sense of identity, purpose and belonging.

What ND respondents are desiring and needing from line managers/leaders as found in this research is:

- Managers/leaders do not need to know the fine details of each condition – but be open to finding a way to work together.
- Be clear in the detail of the output required ensuring communication context is understood.

- Keep the discussion open allowing questions to be asked by the ND as they process in order to understand in their 'ND interpretation' of what is required.
- Allowing as many questions as needed so that the ND can deliver what you are needing from them.
- View ND in the team as a strength, an opportunity for new perspectives.

People with ND need enhanced awareness and understanding from line managers and HR, along with certain workplace adjustments made to enable them to fully participate in the workplace. Some employees functioning with ND fear disclosing their condition, indicating exclusion and a behavioural change from co-workers once disclosed. Other choose not to after witnessing negative behaviour towards other co-workers precluding the ability to request workplace adjustments (Davies *et al.*, 2022; IML, 2020; IML, 2020a; IML, 2020b).

Many are unaware that holding such views and actioning accordingly may be a breach of the equitability legislation in many countries. By changing communication approaches to better enable active participation and wider employment, employees functioning with ND have the opportunity to demonstrate the benefits they bring to an organisation in greater competitive differentiation through their unique skills, including creative thinking and problem-solving skills (Matuson, 2019; Silberman, 2015). Table 2 offers such a communication framework.

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