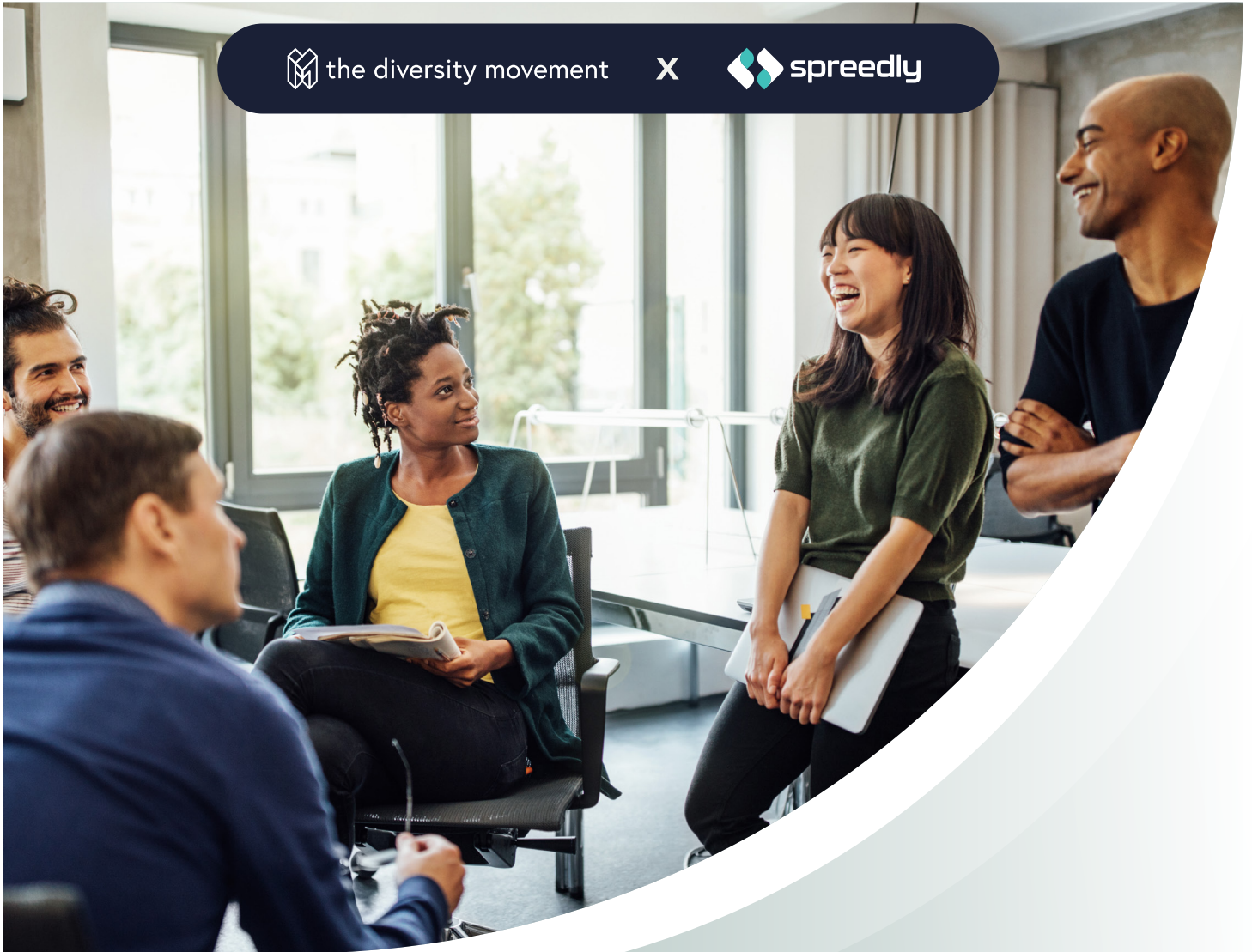




the diversity movement



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# Thinking Differently About Different Ways of Thinking

Best Practices for Communicating and Working  
with Neurodivergent Colleagues



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## INTRODUCTION: WHAT IS NEURODIVERSITY?

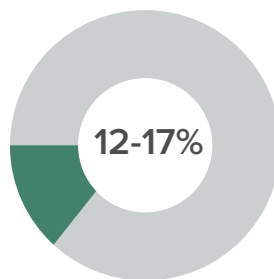
All human beings don't learn and think alike. People experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways. The term "neurodiversity" is used to describe the range of natural variation in human brain functions involved in learning, thinking, and processing information.

Neurodivergent individuals might include those with autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and other neurological and developmental conditions and learning styles. People with a less typical cognitive variation can be described as neurodivergent; individuals with more typical intellectual and cognitive functioning are referred to as neurotypical.

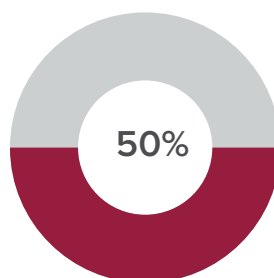


Neurological differences should be recognized and respected as a category of diversity. Neurodivergent individuals are often creative, big-picture, out-of-the box thinkers. That can make neurodiversity a creative advantage at work. Neurodivergent Individuals may be more likely to challenge accepted procedures, spot and analyze problems, process flaws in new ways, and speak out frankly about what they find. They may make connections that others overlook, take alternative paths, and discover innovative solutions.

Neurodiverse teams, which include people who think and learn in different ways, are an asset for companies. It's also important for business leaders to understand neurodiversity, because an estimated 12-17% of people are neurodivergent, or roughly one in eight. However, fewer than 50% of people who are neurodivergent have received a diagnosis. Of those who have a diagnosis, many choose not to disclose their condition at work to avoid being stigmatized.



of people are neurodivergent



of people who are neurodivergent have received a diagnosis

**We created this guidebook for three reasons:**

- ✓ To describe what neurodiversity is (and isn't);
- ✓ To provide you with best practices and actionable advice for collaborating and communicating more effectively with your neurodivergent colleagues; and,
- ✓ To help you strengthen your workplace culture overall. Creating a more diverse and inclusive workplace will help everyone to do their best work and increase the productivity of all employees and teams.

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## SOME TYPES OF NEURODIVERSITY



**Autism** is a neurological developmental condition. Autism does not impact intelligence, however people with autism often have subtle problems using language or making facial expressions. This results in a range of difficulties related to communication and social interactions. Individuals may have difficulty dealing with change, auditory stimulation, and other points of view. They may misunderstand or overlook nonverbal exchanges and group dynamics. They may also exhibit excellent concentration, problem-solving skills, and attention to detail.



**Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)** is a neurodevelopmental condition that affects the nervous system, including the brain, during development from childhood to adulthood. People with ADHD can experience impulsivity, hyperactivity, distractedness, and difficulty following instructions. The condition is also consistent with increased creativity, hyper-focus, curiosity, and energy.



**Dyslexia** is a learning difficulty that primarily affects the skills involved in accurate and fluent word reading and spelling. Some people with dyslexia may also have challenges with information processing, short-term memory, and timekeeping. Potential advantages include visual thinking, mechanical skills, and creativity.



**Dyspraxia** is a learning difficulty affecting coordination, movement, balance, and organization abilities. Motor difficulties include poor hand-to-eye coordination and spatial awareness, making writing difficult. Common assets of people with dyspraxia include emotional intelligence, empathy, and strong verbal skills.





**Dyscalculia** is a difficulty understanding number concepts and performing calculations. People with dyscalculia can struggle with time, measurement, and spatial reasoning. They may also exhibit above-average verbal or written communication skills.



**Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)** causes people to have unwanted, intrusive thoughts, images, or urges that trigger intense feelings of distress. Those with the condition engage in compulsive behaviors in an effort to stop obsessing and reduce distress. Employers may find that people with OCD excel at jobs that require long periods of time working alone and those requiring repetition and double-checking, such as quality control.



**Tourette Syndrome** is a condition that can cause people to have sudden, involuntary, and uncontrollable movements such as tics and eye twitches, or to make sounds repeatedly. Tourette Syndrome can also co-occur with ASD, ADHD, OCD, and anxiety or depression. Many individuals with this diagnosis also exhibit strong observational skills and creativity.

## A Different Way of Thinking and Learning

Nearly one in eight people is neurodivergent. This means that you, and everyone you know, is likely to have a workplace colleague who thinks differently, and absorbs information differently, than others.

Unfortunately, myths, misconceptions, and stereotypes abound about people who are neurodivergent. It's important to break down outdated narratives and unconscious biases that suggest neurodivergence is abnormal, a shortcoming, or a disability. In fact, there is no one "right" way of thinking, processing, learning, and behaving. Differences needn't be viewed as deficits.

In fact, neurological differences drive progress in every field, and cognitive contrasts can lead to inspired, productive work. Rather than considering neurodivergence as a disability or inability, it can be a professional asset. Study after study has shown that people with neurodivergences make exceptional employees and drive innovation and problem-solving.

- ✓ The Institute for Corporate Productivity found that 86% of employers rated employees with intellectual and developmental disabilities as very good in four out of four areas critical to business success (Dependability, motivation, engagement, and peer integration).
- ✓ Many highly accomplished people who identify as autistic say their autism contributed to their success.
- ✓ Research shows that 35 percent of company founders in the U.S. identified themselves as dyslexic, compared with 15 percent in the general population.

If an employee chooses not to disclose their diagnosis, it can be challenging to accommodate the unique mix of needs they may have to be fully productive on the job. To answer this challenge as a manager, make it a general practice to ask all employees how you can support their productivity and success. If you have employees who are neurodivergent, this opens the door to answering this question with or without referencing a diagnosis.



As you have these conversations, take to heart this saying:

**"If you've met one neurodivergent person, then you've met one neurodivergent person."** Remember that each individual is unique. Two people with dyslexia may have different challenges and responses, and need different accommodations.

# BEST PRACTICES FOR WORKPLACE COMMUNICATION

A company's employees often come from a variety of places and cultures, with different life experiences and communication styles. Most are neurotypical; some are neurodivergent. Learning to communicate effectively helps all employees to achieve goals and work cohesively. The following are recommendations that will benefit all employees, neurodivergent and neurotypical alike:

## At Meetings

These are general guidelines for meeting behavior, however, those leading meetings should understand the individual needs of their team members. Neurodivergent individuals absorb information differently and may need accommodations. Those with auditory or verbal processing issues may need more time to comment or respond to questions. Those with ADHD might doodle or fidget in order to focus during meetings.

### 1. Be fully present

Being present means being focused, aware, and engaged. Give others at the meeting your undivided attention.

### 2. Listen to understand

Active, empathic listening means absorbing what others are saying with an open mind, without interrupting, judging, jumping to conclusions, or planning what to say next. Ask open-ended questions. Repeat and rephrase what others have said to confirm your understanding.

### 3. Practice generous assumptions

Assume that everyone is doing the best they can. Also assume that people want the best for you – and treat them in the same manner.

### 4. Make space, take space

Making space means taking a step back to make room for others to share their ideas. Taking space means stepping up, respectfully, to share ideas of your own. Consider which will best benefit the group.

### 5. Respect confidentiality

Retain information you learn at meetings, but refrain from sharing details with others afterward, unless you are authorized/instructed to do so.





## Written & Verbal Communication

Office workers are often barraged with hundreds of messages a day. To help reduce clutter and foster healthy communication, follow the five C's of effective communication: **Clear, Concise, Complete, Correct and Courteous**. Use these principles to guide every interaction, whether in person, email, text, telephone, or online.

## Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal communication can play a major part in how you are perceived by others. Be considerate of your listener's personal space. If possible, sit alongside and angled toward them rather than directly opposite. Maintain an open body position, make comfortable eye contact, and allow your facial expressions to convey your emotions.

## Vary the Communication Method to Suit the Situation

Electronic communication can be misinterpreted more easily than verbal or face-to-face conversations. When discussing complex or nuanced topics, connecting over the phone or video chat can be helpful. If possible, enable your camera when communicating online, so the meeting participants can see any nonverbal gestures and facial expressions.

Again, it is vital to find out and use each person's preferred method of communication. For some, phone or video chats can be substantially more challenging than electronic messaging, especially if the conversation is unstructured. The key is to use a communication method that enables participants to convey ideas and reach understanding.

## Recognize Communication Barriers, and Work to Bypass Them

Watch out for roadblocks to effective communications. Unconscious biases are automatic, unintentional, and often deeply ingrained learned stereotypes that everyone carries. Other factors that can cause miscommunications are emotions, cultural differences, mistrust, and hierarchy (i.e., communication between employees at different levels or departments). Applying the best practices listed above can help you to overcome these barriers.

# COMMON AREAS OF MISCOMMUNICATION AND WAYS TO IMPROVE

Here are some common workplace challenges that neurodivergent employees might face and best practices to address them. Remember, the challenges listed here are general examples; not every neurodivergent person has these challenges. In addition, people with different conditions might face similar challenges.



## Meetings

Particular care should be taken when organizing meetings to maximize productivity and ensure every team member can contribute their best ideas. Impromptu, unstructured, and lengthy discussions are often counterproductive. Taking time to set objectives and circulate an agenda can help everyone in a neurodiverse group.

## Challenges for Some Individuals

- ✓ Difficulty setting up meetings (autism, ADHD)
- ✓ Difficulty being on time for meetings (ADHD, dyscalculia)
- ✓ Difficulty paying attention in meetings (autism, ADHD)
- ✓ Difficulty understanding spoken communication (autism, ADHD, auditory processing disorders)
- ✓ Difficulty formulating immediate responses to questions (autism, auditory processing disorders)
- ✓ Difficulty giving immediate feedback on written documents (dyslexia)
- ✓ Difficulty taking written notes (dyspraxia)
- ✓ Difficulty shifting attention and regaining focus between closely scheduled meetings (ADHD)

## Recommendations

- ✓ If at all possible, schedule meetings in advance, so participants can ensure they are on time and ready for the discussion. This is especially important when the meeting is virtual.
- ✓ When one meeting follows another, leave ample time for participants to regroup and refocus, ideally between 15 and 30 minutes. [Context switching](#) is challenging for everyone, but particularly for those with ADHD.
- ✓ For every meeting, provide an online agenda in advance that allows attendees to prepare their thoughts.
- ✓ For meetings over 60 minutes, provide adequate breaks for participants to rest and refocus.
- ✓ Before closing a meeting, hold space for additional questions or comments that may have come up; avoid rushing the meeting to close.
- ✓ After every meeting, provide attendees with a written record of important discussion items and key decisions made. This helps relieve pressure on neurodivergent individuals and also provides helpful reference for those unable to attend.





### Written Communications

Keep your written communications clear, concise, and straightforward. Follow up in person or with a scheduled phone call to ensure alignment and answer questions related to the communication. A good policy for all employees, which can be especially helpful to neurodivergent colleagues, is when assigning a task or project, directly state the action you want the individual to take and the due date, ensuring the instructions are visually prominent on the page.

## Challenges for Some Individuals

- ✓ Difficulty perceiving context or tone of written messages (autism)
- ✓ Unintentional tone that seems abrupt, rude, or dismissive (autism)
- ✓ Difficulty processing written communications and documents that have a lot of number data (dyslexia)

## Recommendations

- ✓ When using a company-wide online communications app such as Slack, make sure that decisions are always summarized and shared at the end of every conversation thread and in the appropriate system of record. Multiple communications between a questioner and team members – with no conclusion stated – can be uncomfortable and confusing for neurodivergent colleagues.
- ✓ Encourage kindness and grace in communicating with others. Approach every message with a spirit of teamwork and goodwill. Don't assume bad intentions when reading a message, and don't send messages when upset or impatient.
- ✓ Allow ample time for everyone to read and process supporting documents.



### Education & Training

Remember that neurodivergent individuals absorb information differently. Discuss and discover whether reading, listening, hands-on training, or some combination of these methods work best for each person. Provide training in multiple formats or seek out training that has a combination of learning methods to accommodate more of your team.

## Challenges for Some Individuals

- ✓ Different learning styles (autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, dyscalculia)
- ✓ Difficulty following verbal instructions (autism, ADHD)

## Recommendations

- ✓ Don't rely on one single instruction method.
- ✓ Show trainees what you mean, and also provide detailed written instructions.



## Hiring

Companies thrive when they hire the right people for the right jobs. By broadening traditional approaches to resume reviews and interviews, managers can tap into the talents of neurodiverse candidates. Additionally, if you are too narrow in your hiring process, you could be missing out on a game-changing candidate for your organization.

## Common Challenges for Managers

- ✓ Unconscious biases
- ✓ Assumptions about people with different social skills
- ✓ Assumptions about nontraditional employment histories

## Recommendations

- ✓ Provide neurodiversity awareness training to managers, team members, mentors, and others involved in recruiting/retaining employees. Awareness training facilitates honest, open conversations about individual learning and communication styles, work habits, and preferred ways to receive feedback.
- ✓ Utilize in-person or online interviews. Consider changing telephone interviews to video calls.
- ✓ Use job-specific metrics to judge candidates; use technical skills assessments to determine the candidate's ability to do the job. For example, instead of asking a candidate about the computer languages they know, ask them to demonstrate their coding skills.
- ✓ Provide questions ahead of time, so candidates can prepare and bring notes. Be open to receiving answers in writing if the individual has challenges or anxiety around responding verbally.
- ✓ Recognize that a person with autism might not make eye contact and may take longer to think before answering questions. If the position does not require strong social skills, assess whether the applicant has the necessary functional skills.





### Onboarding

Give thoughtful consideration to your onboarding process for each employee, particularly when the position involves remote work. Upfront discussion and planning will help to ensure a smooth start.

## Common Challenges for Managers

- ✓ Employee has difficulty acclimating
- ✓ Employee is reluctant to ask for accommodations

## Recommendations

- ✓ During the employee onboarding process, take time to learn about how the individual works best and help set them up for success. Make it clear that you are open to their questions and suggestions for adjustments.
- ✓ Encourage managers to ask everyone on their team what they need to be productive. Remember that each person is unique and avoid making assumptions.
- ✓ If a new hire discloses that they are neurodivergent, discuss how any accommodations will align with the needs of the entire team. If possible, help them acclimate to the workplace by matching them with a mentor, sponsor, or job coach.
- ✓ Explain to the new hire how to ask for information and where to get help.



## Management

Great managers identify the strengths and needs of their employees and create an environment where each person can do their best work. Applying management best practices benefits the productivity of neurodivergent individuals and everyone on the team.

## Common Challenges for Managers

- ✓ Employee has different work style
- ✓ Miscommunication when managers and colleagues aren't clear and direct

## Recommendations

- ✓ In the office, provide a mix of quiet spaces to work as well as open environments to collaborate.
- ✓ When making assignments or collaborating on a project, be clear and specific about instructions; ensure there is no ambiguity in your expectations. Confirm how and when to ask for further information or assistance.
- ✓ When giving feedback or correcting behavior, be clear, precise, and direct. Avoid using metaphors. Tell the employee exactly what they need to do differently. Avoid alluding to or hinting at the points you want to make. Describe what went wrong and what you want them to do to fix it.
- ✓ Focus on job performance and deliverables. Place value on getting the task done, rather than how it is done.
- ✓ Schedule weekly or biweekly check-ins to reinforce the goal or intended impact of projects, discuss priorities, provide guidance on overcoming obstacles, and celebrate progress.
- ✓ Continue to encourage employees to advocate for themselves and what they need to be successful.
- ✓ Consider providing confidential, voluntary surveys facilitated through Human Resources to better understand your entire employee population, including the needs of neurodivergent employees who may or may not have disclosed that aspect of their identity.

## EXAMPLES OF BEST COMMUNICATION PRACTICES

These five examples help to illustrate the difference between communications that create challenges and interactions that encourage high performance from neurodivergent employees:

INEFFECTIVE	EFFECTIVE
You describe a new assignment to your employee as you're both walking down the hallway.	Write down the assignment and give it to them on paper or digitally. They may not remember what you mentioned in passing.
You tell your team that you're "looking for volunteers" for an additional task, when you actually need or expect their participation.	Be clear about your requests and expectations. If you describe the assignment as optional, a neurotypical employee may recognize the context that help is needed and volunteer; a neurodivergent employee may take you at your word and not step forward.
You or your company makes decisions about what employees need to be productive without consulting them.	Involve your employees when defining policies and accommodations.
You put an employee on the spot by unexpectedly asking for detailed answers or data during a meeting.	Provide all employees adequate time to prepare answers in advance and write down the requested information.
You constrain the creativity of your employees with "this is how we've always done it" thinking, or a highly structured set of rules and design requirements.	Encourage employees to find new connections, share insights, and pursue creative new approaches.



# WORKPLACE ACCOMMODATIONS

The [Americans with Disabilities Act mandates](#) that employers must provide reasonable accommodations to ensure an inclusive workplace environment for all employees. Common examples of accommodations include:

- ✓ Providing employees with assistive devices as necessary
- ✓ Allowing flexibility in worksite location
- ✓ Ensuring that meeting documents are provided beforehand

It makes sense to think of “reasonable accommodations” as “productivity enhancers” instead. By removing barriers and distractions, you are empowering your team to operate with maximum productivity.

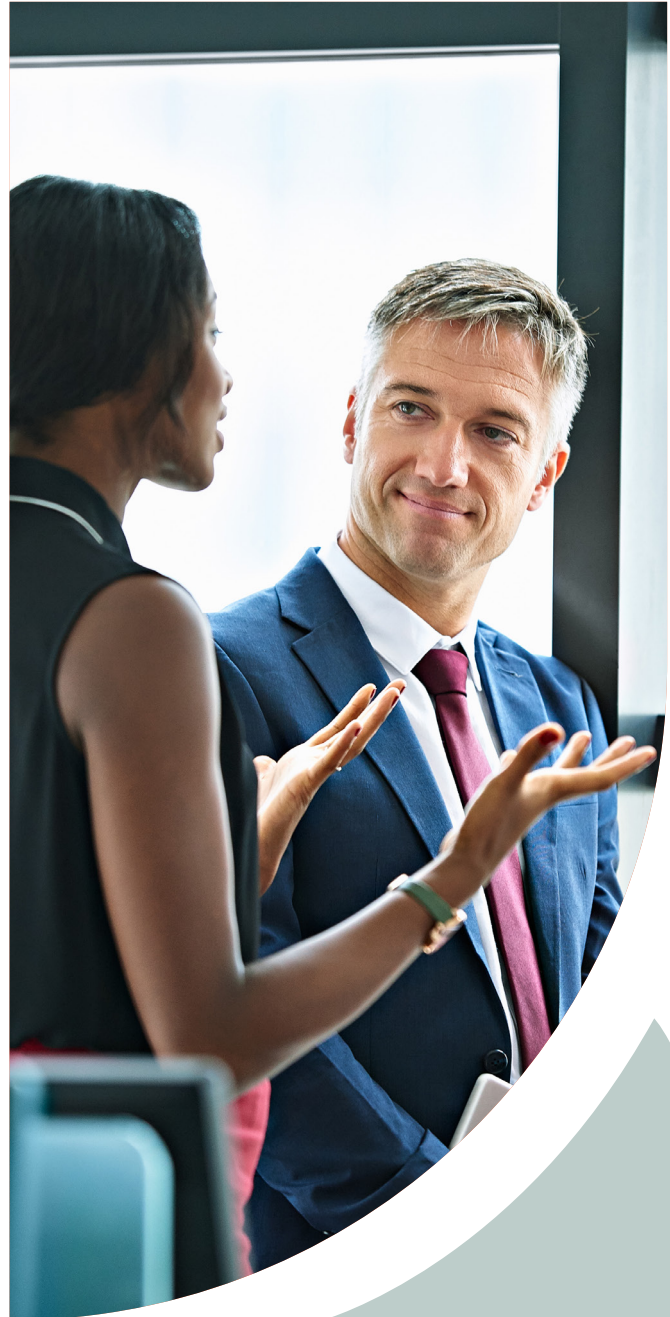
Many employers discover that the accommodations they make for their neurodivergent employees improve workplace satisfaction and outcomes for all employees. Creating an inclusive environment for people with different thinking styles can make everyone feel welcome, respected, and encouraged to contribute. So when you make accommodations, do so by default for all employees. This removes the burden from individual employees or groups to ask or advocate for special resources and policies that benefit only them. It also supports a workplace culture based not only on practicality, but also on empathy, kindness, and teamwork.



## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In closing, remember that every individual is unique. Using the tools and insights in this guidebook will enable you to communicate more effectively and embrace the power of differing approaches and perspectives, including people who are neurodivergent. Doing so will help you to create a workplace where all employees feel comfortable and produce their best work.

Neurodiversity inclusion is not just a matter of expanding your organization's diversity. It's a beneficial business practice and the proof is in the performance: Neurodivergent individuals have demonstrated capacity for exceptional work and high productivity. By expanding the range of ways your employees learn, think, and process information, you'll simultaneously broaden the array of talents, skills, and insights they deliver. Top performing organizations have come to recognize that a more neurodiverse team is a stronger team. We encourage you to join them.



# READ, WATCH, LISTEN, LEARN

Movies, books, podcasts and other media are easy ways to learn more about neurodiversity, and how to celebrate different ways of thinking at your organization. Below, you'll find a short list of resources that may be helpful in broadening your perspective on neurodiversity.

## Books/ Articles

[The Autistic Brain](#), by Temple Grandin and Richard Panek

[Visual Thinking](#) by Temple Grandin

[This is Dyslexia](#), by Kate Griggs

[Percy Jackson and the Lightning Thief](#), by Rick Riordan

[Eleanor Oliphant Is Completely Fine](#), by Gail Honeyman

[The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time](#), by Mark Haddon

[Neurodiversity as a Competitive Advantage](#) by Robert D. Austin and Gary P. Pisano, *Harvard Business Review*

## Podcasts

[Beyond 6 Seconds](#)

[Autism in Black Podcast](#)

[Neurodiversity: Eliminating Kryptonite; Enabling Superheroes](#)

[Uniquely Human: The Podcast](#)

[Neurodiversity at Work](#)

## Documentaries/Movies

[Everything, Everywhere, All at Once](#)

[Temple Grandin](#)

[Like Stars on Earth](#)

[The Disruptors](#)

[Amélie](#)

## Other Resources

[Autism Speaks](#)

[Autism Society of North Carolina](#)

[TEACCH Autism Program: Employer Training](#)

[The International Dyslexia Association](#)

[Attention Deficit Disorder Association](#)

Neurodiversity Hub's [Resources for Employers](#)

[ADDitude](#), an online magazine that provides content and support for Attention Deficit and related conditions



## About The Diversity Movement

The Diversity Movement offers a suite of employee experience applications that personalizes diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) for your organization and delivers real world business outcomes. Our team of experts provides a customized mix of online learning, tools, events, and consulting services that help our partners create future focused, employee-centered cultures. Learn more at [thediversitymovement.com](https://thediversitymovement.com).

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## About Spreedly

Spreedly supports rapidly growing organizations by providing a powerful platform to flexibly and economically process payments. The innovative Spreedly Global Payments Orchestration platform provides a cloud-based credit card vault that empowers companies to enable, optimize, and analyze revenue by building one integration and then routing transactions through virtually any combination of payment services. Spreedly is a public company founded in 2007 and headquartered in Durham, North Carolina. Learn more at [spreedly.com](https://spreedly.com).