Neurodiversity in the Workplace: A Comprehensive Examination of Organizational Practices Supporting Neurodivergent Employee Wellbeing

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Neurodiversity in the Workplace: A Comprehensive Examination of Organizational Practices Supporting Neurodivergent Employee Wellbeing

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Abstract

The neurodiversity movement has fundamentally transformed how organizations conceptualize cognitive differences in the workplace, shifting from deficit-based models toward strength-based perspectives that recognize the value of neurological variation. This narrative review provides a comprehensive examination of organizational practices that support neurodivergent employee wellbeing, synthesizing research across autism spectrum conditions, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and other forms of neurodivergence. Drawing on the neurodiversity paradigm, the social model of disability, and person-environment fit theory—while engaging critically with tensions within and among these frameworks—the article analyzes the prevalence and characteristics of neurodivergent employees, examines workplace challenges and barriers they face, and evaluates organizational interventions with attention to evidence quality. Key findings suggest that environmental modifications, inclusive management practices, flexible work arrangements, and organizational culture change can enhance neurodivergent employee wellbeing and performance, though evidence quality varies across interventions and significant implementation challenges remain. The article critically examines tensions, trade-offs, and unintended consequences of neurodiversity initiatives, addresses structural and policy-level factors alongside organizational practices, and considers perspectives of multiple stakeholders including managers, coworkers, and neurodivergent employees themselves. Particular attention is given to technology and remote work implications, temporal dynamics across career stages, and the evolving nature of work organization. The article concludes with implications for human resource management, organizational policy, and future research directions, while acknowledging limitations of the current evidence base and the contested nature of neurodiversity as both concept and movement.

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Introduction

The contemporary workplace presents a paradox for neurodivergent individuals. On one hand, organizations increasingly recognize the unique talents and perspectives that neurodivergent employees bring to their roles, with technology giants, financial institutions, and consulting firms launching dedicated neurodiversity hiring initiatives (Austin & Pisano, 2017). On the other hand, neurodivergent individuals continue to face significant employment disparities, with research indicating that autistic adults experience unemployment rates substantially higher than both the general population and individuals with other disabilities (Shattuck et al., 2012). This tension between organizational recognition of neurodivergent talent and the persistent barriers these individuals face underscores the need for comprehensive examination of workplace practices that genuinely support neurodivergent employee wellbeing.

The term *neurodiversity* was coined by sociologist Judy Singer in the late 1990s to describe the natural variation in human neurological functioning (Singer, 1999). Rather than conceptualizing

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conditions such as autism spectrum disorder (ASD), attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, and Tourette syndrome as deficits requiring remediation, the neurodiversity paradigm frames these differences as natural variations in human cognition that have existed throughout human history and contribute to the diversity of human thought and capability (Armstrong, 2010). This reconceptualization has profound implications for how organizations approach the employment and support of neurodivergent individuals. As Silberman (2015) documented in his comprehensive history of autism, the recognition of neurological diversity represents a fundamental shift in societal understanding that has gained momentum across educational, clinical, and organizational contexts.

However, the neurodiversity paradigm is not without contestation. Scholars have debated whether neurodiversity is best understood as an empirical description of neurological variation, a political identity, or an ideological framework with particular normative commitments (Runswick-Cole et al., 2016). Critical perspectives have questioned the movement's relationship to neoliberalism, its potential to create hierarchies among disabled people based on perceived productivity value, and its focus on inclusion within existing structures rather than more fundamental transformation (McGuire, 2016). These critiques reflect broader tensions within disability studies between reformist approaches seeking accommodation within existing systems and more radical perspectives questioning the structures themselves. This article engages with these critical perspectives while examining organizational practices, recognizing that the neurodiversity concept itself remains contested terrain.

The significance of addressing neurodiversity in organizational contexts is substantial, though estimates of prevalence vary depending on definitional boundaries. Conservative estimates suggest that neurodivergent individuals comprise approximately 15% to 20% of the global population (Doyle, 2020), representing a substantial proportion of the potential workforce. Research suggests that approximately 15% to 17% of the workforce may identify as neurodivergent when encompassing the full spectrum of neurological differences (LeFevre-Levy et al., 2023). However, these figures depend significantly on how neurodivergence is defined—whether through clinical diagnosis, subclinical traits, or self-identification—and the boundaries between neurodivergence and neurotypicality remain contested. Despite these definitional complexities, it is clear that neurodivergent employees frequently encounter workplaces designed around neurotypical cognitive patterns, communication styles, and sensory preferences, creating systematic disadvantages that undermine both individual wellbeing and organizational effectiveness.

Employee wellbeing has emerged as a central concern in organizational psychology and human resource management, with substantial evidence linking wellbeing to organizational outcomes including productivity, creativity, retention, and organizational citizenship behaviors (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). For this article, *wellbeing* encompasses multiple dimensions including subjective life satisfaction, positive psychological functioning, absence of mental health difficulties, and the ability to flourish in one's work and life (Keyes, 2002). For neurodivergent employees, wellbeing is inextricably linked to the degree of fit between their neurological characteristics and workplace environments, practices, and cultures. When this fit is poor, neurodivergent employees may experience elevated stress, anxiety, depression, and burnout, leading to reduced performance and premature exit from the workforce (Raymaker et al., 2020). Conversely, when organizations create environments that accommodate and leverage neurological differences, neurodivergent employees can thrive and make distinctive contributions.

This article aims to provide a comprehensive, theoretically grounded, and critically informed examination of organizational practices that support neurodivergent employee wellbeing. The analysis synthesizes research from organizational psychology, disability studies, neuroscience, and human resource management while engaging with critical perspectives that complicate simplistic narratives of organizational inclusion. The article addresses several key questions: What theoretical frameworks best explain the relationship between neurodiversity and workplace wellbeing, and what are their limitations? What challenges do neurodivergent employees commonly face in

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workplace settings? What organizational practices have demonstrated effectiveness in supporting neurodivergent employee wellbeing, and how strong is the evidence? What tensions, trade-offs, and unintended consequences must be considered? How do technology and evolving work arrangements affect neurodivergent employees? And what structural and policy factors shape neurodivergent employment outcomes beyond organizational-level interventions?

The structure of the article proceeds as follows. First, the methodology section describes the review approach. Second, the theoretical framework section establishes conceptual foundations while critically examining tensions within and among perspectives. Third, the article examines definitional complexities surrounding neurodiversity. Fourth, the analysis addresses prevalence and characteristics of neurodivergent employees. Fifth, workplace challenges and barriers are examined. Sixth, the article explores impacts on employee wellbeing. Seventh, organizational practices are evaluated with attention to evidence quality. Eighth, technology and remote work implications are examined. Ninth, temporal dynamics across career stages are addressed. Tenth, tensions, trade-offs, and unintended consequences are critically examined. Eleventh, stakeholder perspectives beyond neurodivergent employees are addressed. Twelfth, the business case is discussed with critical analysis. Thirteenth, structural and policy factors are examined. Finally, the article concludes with future directions, limitations, and implications.

Methodology and Approach

This article presents a comprehensive narrative review of literature concerning neurodiversity in workplace contexts. Narrative reviews are appropriate for synthesizing diverse literature across multiple disciplines, developing theoretical integration, and providing comprehensive overviews of complex topics (Green et al., 2006). Unlike systematic reviews, narrative reviews do not follow standardized protocols for literature identification and quality assessment, which represents both a strength (allowing flexible, integrative synthesis) and a limitation (potential for selection bias).

Literature Identification

Literature was identified through multiple strategies. Electronic database searches were conducted in PsycINFO, Web of Science, Business Source Complete, and Google Scholar using search terms including "neurodiversity," "autism employment," "ADHD workplace," "dyslexia employment," "workplace accommodation," "disability inclusion," "remote work disability," "assistive technology workplace," and related terms. Reference lists of key articles were reviewed to identify additional relevant sources. Seminal books in the field were consulted, and grey literature including organizational reports and practitioner publications was selectively incorporated.

Scope and Inclusion Criteria

The review focused on:

- *Forms of neurodivergence:* Autism spectrum conditions, ADHD, dyslexia, and related neurodevelopmental differences, with primary emphasis on autism and ADHD given the larger evidence base
- *Workplace contexts:* Formal employment settings, with emphasis on organizational practices rather than self-employment or sheltered employment
- *Outcome domains:* Employee wellbeing broadly defined, including mental health, job satisfaction, and flourishing, as well as performance and retention
- *Geographic scope:* Primarily research from North America, Europe, and Australia, reflecting the current evidence base, with acknowledgment of limitations this entails
- *Temporal scope:* Literature published primarily from 2000 to 2024, with emphasis on more recent research reflecting current workplace contexts

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Limitations of the Review Approach

Several limitations should be acknowledged:

- *The non-systematic approach may have missed relevant literature or introduced selection bias*
- *Publication bias likely affects the literature, with positive findings regarding neurodiversity initiatives more likely to be published*
- *The evidence base is geographically concentrated, limiting generalizability to other cultural contexts*
- *Many recommended practices lack rigorous empirical evaluation*
- *The field is rapidly evolving, and some cited evidence may become dated*
- *The review author's perspective inevitably shapes interpretation and synthesis*

These limitations are discussed further in the concluding section.

Theoretical Framework

Understanding how organizational practices influence neurodivergent employee wellbeing requires integration of multiple theoretical perspectives. This section develops a framework drawing on three complementary approaches: the neurodiversity paradigm, the social model of disability, and person-environment fit theory. Importantly, this section also critically examines tensions within and among these perspectives, recognizing that theoretical integration involves navigating genuine complexities rather than simple synthesis. Figure 1 provides a visual representation of the theoretical framework and key relationships among constructs.

The Neurodiversity Paradigm

The neurodiversity paradigm represents a fundamental reconceptualization of neurological differences that challenges traditional medical and deficit-based models (Singer, 1999). At its core, the paradigm advances three interrelated propositions. First, neurological differences such as autism, ADHD, and dyslexia represent natural variations in human neurology rather than disorders requiring cure or normalization. Second, these variations have existed throughout human history and have contributed to human survival and cultural development. Third, the challenges faced by neurodivergent individuals arise primarily from environmental and social barriers rather than inherent deficits.

Armstrong (2010) elaborated the neurodiversity paradigm in his influential work, arguing that neurodivergent individuals possess distinctive cognitive strengths that have been undervalued in educational and workplace contexts designed around neurotypical norms. For example, autistic individuals may demonstrate exceptional pattern recognition, attention to detail, and systematic thinking; individuals with ADHD may exhibit enhanced creativity, spontaneity, and ability to hyperfocus on engaging tasks; and dyslexic individuals may show strengths in visual-spatial reasoning, holistic thinking, and entrepreneurial orientation (Armstrong, 2010).

The neurodiversity paradigm has important implications for organizational practice. Rather than focusing exclusively on remediating neurodivergent employees' perceived weaknesses, organizations adopting this paradigm seek to identify and leverage distinctive strengths while providing appropriate environmental supports. Baron-Cohen (2017) argued that this paradigm shift represents not merely a change in terminology but a fundamental reorientation of how society conceptualizes and responds to neurological variation.

Critiques and Limitations of the Neurodiversity Paradigm

The neurodiversity paradigm has faced substantive critiques that deserve serious consideration. First, scholars and advocates have expressed concern that emphasis on neurodivergent strengths may inadvertently minimize genuine challenges many neurodivergent individuals face, or create hierarchies of acceptability based on perceived productivity value (den Houting, 2019). The

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celebration of autistic "superpowers" in technology contexts, for example, may marginalize autistic individuals whose profiles do not fit this stereotype.

Second, critical disability studies scholars have questioned the neurodiversity movement's relationship to neoliberalism, arguing that the framework's emphasis on productivity and economic contribution may reinforce rather than challenge capitalist valuations of human worth (Runswick-Cole et al., 2016). Rose (1999) argued that contemporary governance increasingly operates through the optimization of human capital, and from this perspective, neurodiversity initiatives that emphasize productivity benefits may align more with neoliberal rationalities than with disability rights. McGuire (2016) similarly critiqued the ways neurodiversity discourse can be appropriated to serve interests other than those of neurodivergent people themselves.

Third, some scholars have questioned whether conditions like ADHD represent genuine neurological differences or socially constructed responses to educational and workplace environments demanding particular forms of attention and compliance (Timimi & Leo, 2009). This perspective suggests that some "neurodivergent" traits may be pathologized normal variation, while other expressions of distress may reflect environmental problems requiring social rather than individual solutions. These critiques echo broader debates within the sociology of mental health regarding medicalization (Conrad, 2007).

Fourth, not all individuals with conditions encompassed by the neurodiversity framework embrace this identity. Some autistic individuals and families, particularly those affected by significant intellectual disability or high support needs, have critiqued the neurodiversity movement as unrepresentative of their experiences and priorities (Kapp et al., 2013).

A balanced application of the paradigm acknowledges both distinctive strengths and genuine support needs, recognizes substantial individual variation, and remains attentive to the political and economic contexts shaping how neurodiversity is understood and deployed.

The Social Model of Disability

The social model of disability, originating in disability activism and disability studies, provides a complementary theoretical lens for understanding neurodivergent workplace experiences. The model distinguishes between *impairment* (individual biological or psychological characteristics) and *disability* (the social disadvantage imposed by environments and structures designed for a particular norm) (Oliver, 1990). According to this framework, disability is socially constructed through environmental, attitudinal, and institutional barriers rather than residing within individuals.

Applied to neurodiversity, the social model suggests that the challenges faced by neurodivergent employees result primarily from workplaces designed around neurotypical assumptions about cognition, communication, and behavior (Barnes & Mercer, 2010). Open-plan offices, for example, reflect assumptions about optimal work environments that may disadvantage individuals with sensory processing differences or concentration difficulties. Similarly, interview processes emphasizing social fluency and rapid verbal responses may systematically disadvantage autistic candidates whose communication strengths lie elsewhere.

Shakespeare (2006) proposed a critical realist perspective that synthesizes insights from both medical and social models, acknowledging that impairments may involve intrinsic difficulties while emphasizing that social and environmental factors substantially shape how these difficulties are experienced. This integrated perspective is particularly valuable for understanding neurodiversity, as it validates both individual support needs and systemic change imperatives.

Critiques and Limitations of the Social Model

The social model, while influential, has also faced critique. Its strong distinction between impairment and disability may be difficult to maintain in practice, as the experience of impairment is itself shaped by social context (Shakespeare, 2006). For neurodivergent individuals, some challenges—such as sensory pain from certain stimuli or difficulties with cognitive flexibility—may

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not be fully resolvable through environmental modification, suggesting limits to the social model's explanatory power.

Additionally, the social model's focus on barrier removal may inadvertently suggest that impairment itself is unproblematic, which may not resonate with neurodivergent individuals who experience genuine distress or limitation. Thomas (2004) has argued for attention to what she terms "impairment effects"—direct restrictions of activity resulting from impairment rather than from social barriers—alongside disabling barriers. A nuanced application recognizes that both social barriers and individual characteristics contribute to the challenges neurodivergent individuals face, and that support may appropriately address both dimensions.

The social model has direct implications for organizational practice. Rather than focusing exclusively on helping neurodivergent employees adapt to existing workplace structures, organizations should examine how those structures create unnecessary barriers and implement changes that reduce or eliminate such barriers. However, this reorientation should complement rather than replace individual-level support where needed.

Person-Environment Fit Theory

Person-environment (P-E) fit theory provides a third theoretical perspective valuable for understanding neurodivergent employee wellbeing. P-E fit theory proposes that individual outcomes result from the congruence or discrepancy between personal characteristics and environmental features (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Multiple dimensions of fit have been identified, including person-job fit (alignment between individual abilities/preferences and job demands), person-organization fit (alignment between individual values and organizational culture), and person-group fit (alignment between individual characteristics and workgroup norms).

Meta-analytic evidence demonstrates that P-E fit is significantly associated with job satisfaction, organizational commitment, job performance, and turnover intentions (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Poor fit is associated with stress, dissatisfaction, and reduced wellbeing. For neurodivergent employees, fit considerations are particularly salient because many workplace environments are designed around neurotypical cognitive and behavioral patterns that may create systematic misfit.

Importantly, P-E fit theory suggests that fit can be enhanced through changes to either the person or the environment. Traditional approaches to neurodivergence have emphasized person-focused interventions such as coaching, skills training, or behavioral therapy to help neurodivergent individuals better conform to environmental demands. The neurodiversity paradigm and social model suggest that environment-focused interventions—modifying job tasks, physical environments, communication practices, or cultural norms—may be more appropriate and effective (Doyle, 2020).

Critiques and Limitations of P-E Fit Theory

P-E fit theory, while useful, has limitations when applied to neurodivergence. The theory may implicitly assume that fit is achievable through sufficient environmental modification, but some misfit may be irreducible given particular combinations of individual characteristics and role requirements. Additionally, the theory's focus on fit may inadvertently reinforce conformity pressures if fit is conceptualized primarily as individual adaptation to environmental demands.

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model (Demerouti et al., 2001) offers a complementary perspective, suggesting that wellbeing results from the balance between job demands (aspects requiring sustained effort) and job resources (aspects facilitating goal achievement and personal development). For neurodivergent employees, demands may be elevated when environments are poorly matched to cognitive profiles, while appropriate accommodations and supports represent resources that buffer against demand-related strain.

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Theoretical Integration and Tensions

Integrating P-E fit theory with the neurodiversity paradigm and social model yields a framework emphasizing that organizational practices supporting neurodivergent employee wellbeing should focus on enhancing fit through environmental modification rather than exclusively through individual adaptation. However, this integration involves navigating genuine tensions:

- *Individual vs. environmental focus:* How much emphasis should be placed on individual adaptation versus environmental change? A pure social model approach emphasizes environmental change, but individual skill development and self-advocacy also matter.
- *Accommodation vs. fundamental transformation:* Should organizations accommodate neurodivergent individuals within existing structures, or should the structures themselves be fundamentally reconsidered? Critical perspectives, drawing on labor process theory (Braverman, 1974), suggest that contemporary work organization itself may be problematic.
- *Strengths vs. support needs:* How should organizations balance celebrating neurodivergent strengths with acknowledging genuine support needs without either minimizing challenges or reinforcing deficit narratives?

These tensions are revisited throughout the article as specific practices and their implications are examined.

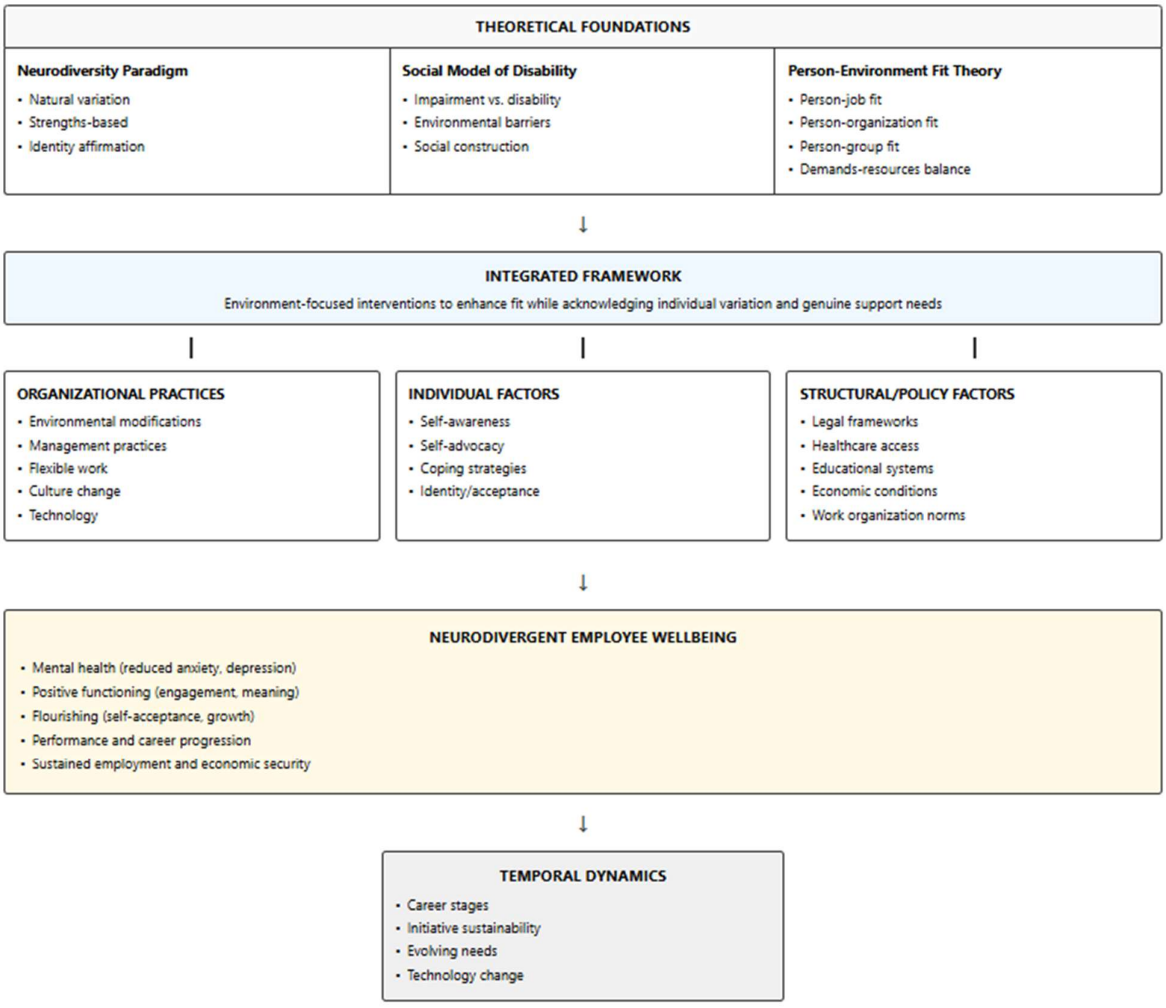

Figure 1: *Theoretical Framework: Relationships Among Key Constructs. Note.* This figure illustrates the theoretical integration underlying the analysis. Organizational practices, individual factors, and

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structural/policy factors interact to influence neurodivergent employee wellbeing. Temporal dynamics affect all relationships over time.

Definitional Complexities and Boundaries

Before proceeding to examine prevalence and workplace practices, it is essential to address the conceptual and definitional complexities surrounding neurodiversity. These complexities have significant implications for how we understand the scope of the phenomenon and the appropriateness of various organizational responses.

Categorical vs. Dimensional Perspectives

Neurodivergent conditions can be understood either categorically (as discrete conditions one either has or does not have) or dimensionally (as extremes of traits distributed continuously in the population). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) operationalizes conditions like autism and ADHD categorically through diagnostic criteria, yet substantial evidence supports dimensional understanding. Autistic traits, for example, appear to exist on a continuum in the general population, with clinical diagnosis representing an administratively determined threshold rather than a natural boundary (Constantino & Todd, 2003).

This dimensional understanding has important implications. If neurodivergent traits exist on continua, the 15-20% prevalence estimates may either underestimate (if including subclinical presentations) or overestimate (if requiring clinical diagnosis) the population of interest. Moreover, if neurotypicality and neurodivergence shade into each other, the accommodation paradigm becomes conceptually complex—does everyone with any elevation in neurodivergent traits warrant accommodation?

One resolution is to conceptualize neurodivergence as involving trait elevations sufficient to create meaningful differences in workplace experience and needs, without requiring formal diagnosis. This approach acknowledges dimensionality while maintaining meaningful distinctions. However, it introduces subjectivity regarding what constitutes "meaningful" difference.

The Social Construction of Diagnosis

Diagnostic categories like autism and ADHD are historically contingent social constructions that have changed substantially over time. The DSM definition of autism has expanded dramatically since its initial description, now encompassing individuals who would not have met earlier criteria. ADHD's boundaries have similarly shifted, with ongoing debate about whether current diagnostic practices capture genuine disorder or medicalize normal behavioral variation (Conrad, 2007).

Rose (1999, 2007) has argued that contemporary psychiatric and psychological categories function as technologies of governance, shaping how individuals understand and manage themselves. From this Foucauldian perspective, neurodevelopmental diagnoses do not simply describe pre-existing conditions but actively constitute categories of personhood with associated expectations, interventions, and subjectivities. This perspective does not deny that genuine neurological differences exist but highlights that how those differences are categorized, named, and responded to reflects social and historical context rather than natural kinds. The implications for workplace practice are significant: organizational neurodiversity initiatives are necessarily responding to categories that are themselves contested and evolving.

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Identity and Self-Identification

Neurodivergence increasingly functions as an identity category, with individuals self-identifying as neurodivergent based on lived experience rather than formal diagnosis. Self-identification may be particularly common among individuals who are female, from minority ethnic backgrounds, or otherwise underdiagnosed by clinical systems that have historically been normed on white male presentations.

Organizations must navigate tensions between formal diagnosis (which may gate-keep access to accommodations but provides some verification) and self-identification (which is more inclusive but may create challenges for resource allocation). These tensions are particularly acute given that diagnosis is often expensive, inaccessible, or subject to bias.

Implications for This Review

Given these definitional complexities, this review adopts an inclusive approach that encompasses:

- *Individuals with formal clinical diagnoses of autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and related conditions*
- *Individuals who self-identify as neurodivergent based on lived experience*
- *Recognition that boundaries between neurodivergence and neurotypicality are contested and contextual*

This approach acknowledges that organizational practices must be responsive to individuals whose presentations and identities do not fit neat categorical boundaries while also recognizing practical limitations in how organizations can operationalize neurodiversity.

Prevalence and Characteristics of Neurodivergent Employees

Understanding the scope and nature of neurodivergence in workplace contexts requires examination of prevalence data and characteristic profiles across different forms of neurological variation. This section reviews evidence on autism spectrum conditions, ADHD, specific learning differences, and other forms of neurodivergence, highlighting both common experiences and important individual variation.

Autism Spectrum Conditions

Autism spectrum conditions are characterized by differences in social communication and interaction alongside restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Prevalence estimates have increased substantially over recent decades, with current data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicating that approximately 1 in 36 children in the United States have been identified with autism (Maenner et al., 2023). Global prevalence is estimated at approximately 1% of the population, with variation across regions likely reflecting differences in diagnostic practices rather than true prevalence differences (Zeidan et al., 2022).

The dramatic increase in autism prevalence over recent decades reflects changing diagnostic criteria, increased awareness, and reduced stigma rather than an actual increase in the underlying phenomenon. This pattern illustrates how prevalence figures are shaped by social and diagnostic factors, not merely epidemiological reality.

Autistic employees present highly heterogeneous profiles of strengths and challenges. Research has documented that autistic individuals may demonstrate strengths in:

- *Attention to detail and pattern recognition: Many autistic individuals demonstrate ability to identify patterns, detect anomalies, and maintain focus on detailed tasks (Happé & Frith, 2006)*
- *Systematic thinking: Preference for structured, rule-based approaches that can be advantageous in fields requiring precision*

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- *Deep knowledge and expertise: Intense interests often translate into deep domain expertise*
- *Honesty and reliability: Direct communication styles and strong adherence to rules and commitments*
- *Unique perspectives: Different cognitive processing can generate novel insights*

However, claims about autistic "superpowers" warrant critical scrutiny. Evidence for exceptional abilities is often based on selected samples or specific subgroups, and the "superpower" narrative may create unrealistic expectations while marginalizing autistic individuals whose profiles differ (Runswick-Cole et al., 2016). A balanced view acknowledges that autistic cognitive profiles differ from neurotypical profiles in ways that represent advantages in some contexts and challenges in others, with substantial individual variation.

Common workplace challenges for autistic employees include navigating unwritten social rules, managing sensory sensitivities in office environments, adapting to unexpected changes, and processing verbal instructions presented without supporting documentation (Scott et al., 2015). The severity and nature of these challenges vary substantially based on individual profiles, co-occurring conditions, workplace environments, and support availability.

Employment outcomes for autistic adults remain concerning. Research indicates that autistic adults experience lower rates of employment than individuals with other disabilities, and those who are employed often work in positions below their skill level (Shattuck et al., 2012). These disparities reflect systemic barriers in recruitment processes, workplace environments, and organizational cultures, though individual factors including support needs and co-occurring conditions also play roles.

Intersectionality and Within-Group Diversity

Autistic experiences and employment outcomes vary significantly across intersecting dimensions of identity. Research has documented that autism has historically been underdiagnosed in women and girls, whose presentations may differ from stereotypically male patterns (Bargiela et al., 2016). Autistic women report distinct workplace experiences, including heightened masking demands reflecting gendered expectations for social and emotional behavior (Hull et al., 2020). Lai et al. (2015) found that sex differences in autism presentation may lead to underrecognition of autistic females, with implications for workplace support.

Racial and ethnic minority autistic individuals face compound discrimination and may experience diagnostic delays related to cultural and linguistic bias in assessment (Mandell et al., 2009). Socioeconomic factors significantly shape access to diagnosis, support services, and accommodating work environments. Autistic individuals with co-occurring intellectual disability, which affects approximately 30% of the autistic population, face distinct challenges and are often absent from workplace neurodiversity research and initiatives.

Most existing research on autism and employment has been conducted with predominantly white, middle-class, verbally fluent samples from North America, Europe, and Australia. This limits generalizability and risks developing practices oriented toward a narrow segment of the autistic population.

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder

ADHD is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent patterns of inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsivity that affect functioning across multiple settings (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). The World Federation of ADHD's consensus statement indicates that ADHD affects approximately 5% of children and 2.5% of adults globally, though recognition of adult ADHD has increased substantially in recent years (Faraone et al., 2021).

Adults with ADHD demonstrate distinctive cognitive profiles that can represent both strengths and challenges in workplace contexts. Research has documented associations between ADHD and:

- *Creativity and divergent thinking: Some research has identified associations between ADHD traits and creative ideation (White & Shah, 2011), though effect sizes are modest and findings are not uniform*

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- *Hyperfocus on engaging tasks: Intense concentration on tasks that capture interest, though this may coexist with difficulty directing attention to less engaging required tasks*
- *Entrepreneurial orientation: Research has found elevated rates of ADHD among entrepreneurs (Wiklund et al., 2016), potentially reflecting comfort with risk and innovative thinking, though survival bias may inflate these estimates*
- *Energy and enthusiasm: High energy levels can drive productivity in appropriate contexts*

Workplace challenges commonly reported by adults with ADHD include difficulty sustaining attention on routine or unstimulating tasks, time management and meeting deadlines, organizational systems and paperwork, impulsivity in communication, and working memory limitations affecting complex instruction-following (Barkley, 2012). The impact of these challenges varies substantially based on job characteristics, with some roles allowing individuals to leverage strengths while others amplify difficulties.

It is important to note that ADHD's status as a valid diagnostic category has been contested. Critical perspectives have questioned whether ADHD represents genuine neurological dysfunction or a mismatch between normal behavioral variation and increasingly demanding educational and workplace environments (Timimi & Leo, 2009). Some scholars have suggested that ADHD diagnoses may partly reflect the intensification of work and educational demands under contemporary capitalism, raising questions about whether the appropriate response is individual accommodation or systemic change in how work and education are organized. While this article generally accepts ADHD as a meaningful category based on substantial neurobiological and genetic evidence (Faraone et al., 2021), acknowledging these critiques highlights the contested terrain surrounding neurodevelopmental diagnosis.

Specific Learning Differences

Specific learning differences, including dyslexia, dyscalculia, and dysgraphia, affect information processing in particular domains while leaving other cognitive abilities intact. Dyslexia, affecting reading and spelling, is the most prevalent, with estimates suggesting it affects 5% to 10% of the population (Peterson & Pennington, 2012). Dyscalculia affects numerical processing, while dysgraphia affects writing.

Research suggests that individuals with dyslexia may demonstrate distinctive strengths including:

- *Visual-spatial reasoning: Strong abilities in three-dimensional thinking and spatial relationships*
- *Holistic processing: Ability to see patterns and connections that others miss*
- *Narrative reasoning: Strength in understanding and communicating through stories*
- *Entrepreneurial aptitude: Research has identified elevated rates of entrepreneurship among individuals with dyslexia, potentially reflecting different cognitive approaches and resilience developed through navigating challenges (Logan, 2009)*

However, as with autism and ADHD, claims about dyslexic strengths warrant critical scrutiny. The relationship between dyslexia and visual-spatial abilities is debated in the scientific literature, and not all dyslexic individuals demonstrate these proposed strengths. Moreover, elevated entrepreneurship rates may reflect selection effects (limited access to traditional career pathways) rather than inherent entrepreneurial advantage.

Workplace challenges related to dyslexia can include reading speed, spelling accuracy, note-taking in meetings, and processing written information quickly. However, with appropriate accommodations such as text-to-speech technology, extended time for reading-intensive tasks, and alternative formats for information, these challenges can be substantially mitigated.

Other Forms of Neurodivergence

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The neurodiversity framework encompasses additional forms of neurological variation including developmental coordination disorder (dyspraxia), Tourette syndrome, and other conditions affecting motor coordination, sensory processing, or neurological functioning. These conditions vary in prevalence and workplace implications but share common experiences of navigating environments designed around neurotypical assumptions.

It is essential to recognize that many individuals experience multiple co-occurring forms of neurodivergence. Research indicates high rates of co-occurrence among autism, ADHD, and specific learning differences, with studies suggesting that up to 70% of autistic individuals may meet criteria for ADHD and that both conditions frequently co-occur with dyslexia and other learning differences (Faraone et al., 2021). This co-occurrence has implications for workplace support, suggesting that categorical approaches focused on single diagnostic labels may be less effective than individualized approaches addressing each person's unique profile of strengths and needs.

Workplace Challenges and Barriers

Neurodivergent employees face a range of challenges in workplace settings that affect their wellbeing, performance, and career progression. These challenges can be conceptualized across multiple domains: physical and sensory environments, social and communication demands, organizational processes and structures, and cultural and attitudinal barriers. Importantly, consistent with the social model of disability, many of these challenges arise from environmental features, though a balanced view acknowledges that some challenges may involve individual factors not fully addressable through environmental modification.

Physical and Sensory Environment Challenges

The physical workplace environment presents significant challenges for many neurodivergent employees, particularly those with sensory processing differences. Research indicates that autistic individuals frequently experience heightened sensitivity to sensory stimuli including noise, lighting, smells, and textures, with sensory overload contributing to fatigue, anxiety, and reduced cognitive capacity (Robertson & Simmons, 2013).

The widespread adoption of open-plan office designs, while intended to facilitate collaboration and reduce real estate costs, has created particularly challenging environments for many employees, with effects likely amplified for neurodivergent individuals. Open-plan offices typically feature:

- *Elevated noise levels:* Conversations, phone calls, keyboard typing, and ambient noise create unpredictable auditory environments
- *Visual distractions:* Movement and activity in peripheral vision
- *Limited control:* Reduced ability to modify personal workspace to meet individual needs
- *Reduced privacy:* Limited spaces for recovery from social demands

Research on open-plan offices indicates that they are associated with reduced concentration, increased stress, and lower productivity for many employees (Bernstein & Turban, 2018), though findings depend on specific design features and work types. For neurodivergent individuals with sensory sensitivities or concentration difficulties, these effects are likely more pronounced.

Lighting presents additional challenges. Fluorescent lighting, common in office environments, produces barely perceptible flickering that some neurodivergent individuals experience as highly distracting or distressing. Similarly, artificial scents from cleaning products, air fresheners, or colleagues' personal care products may be overwhelming for individuals with olfactory sensitivities.

It is important to note that not all neurodivergent individuals experience sensory challenges, and those who do experience them in diverse ways. Some may be hyposensitive rather than hypersensitive to particular stimuli. Organizational responses must be individualized rather than assuming uniform sensory profiles.

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Social and Communication Demands

Workplace social and communication demands can create substantial challenges for neurodivergent employees, particularly those with autism or social anxiety. Many workplaces embed unwritten social rules and expectations that neurotypical individuals navigate intuitively but that can be opaque or confusing for neurodivergent individuals.

Common social and communication challenges include:

- *Navigating small talk:* Informal social conversation that serves relationship-building functions but may be experienced as purposeless or draining
- *Interpreting indirect communication:* Understanding hints, sarcasm, or implied expectations that are not explicitly stated
- *Office politics:* Navigating complex, often unspoken, dynamics of power, alliance, and competition
- *Networking:* Building professional relationships through informal interaction
- *Meeting participation:* Contributing in real-time group discussions that may move quickly and involve multiple simultaneous conversations

Research by Hull et al. (2017) has documented the phenomenon of *camouflaging* or *masking*, in which autistic individuals consciously or unconsciously suppress autistic behaviors and adopt neurotypical social performances to navigate social situations. While masking may facilitate short-term social functioning, it is cognitively and emotionally exhausting and has been associated with negative mental health outcomes. Masking appears particularly prevalent among autistic women, potentially reflecting gendered expectations for social behavior (Hull et al., 2020).

However, it is worth noting that all employees engage in some degree of impression management and behavioral adaptation at work. The question is where the line falls between reasonable professional expectations and problematic demands for conformity. This question does not have a simple answer and may depend on contextual factors including organizational culture, role requirements, and individual capacity.

Communication challenges extend to written and digital communication. Neurodivergent employees may find expectations around email tone, response timing, and communication formality unclear, leading to misunderstandings or perceptions of unprofessionalism. Similarly, the rapid proliferation of communication platforms (email, instant messaging, video calls, project management tools) creates cognitive load challenges for individuals with executive function differences.

Organizational Process and Structural Barriers

Organizational processes and structures are typically designed with neurotypical employees in mind, creating systematic barriers for neurodivergent individuals across the employment lifecycle.

Recruitment and selection processes frequently disadvantage neurodivergent candidates. Traditional interviews emphasize social fluency, rapid verbal response, eye contact, and first impressions—all of which may disadvantage autistic candidates whose strengths lie in other domains (Maras et al., 2021). Application forms requiring lengthy written responses may disadvantage dyslexic candidates, while timed assessments may disadvantage those with processing speed differences or ADHD.

Onboarding and training processes often rely on implicit learning and social observation that may be less accessible to neurodivergent employees. New employees are frequently expected to absorb organizational culture, unwritten rules, and role expectations through observation and informal interaction rather than explicit instruction. Training may be delivered in formats that do not accommodate diverse learning preferences.

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Performance management systems may not account for neurodivergent differences. Performance criteria emphasizing social and communication behaviors (e.g., teamwork, communication, influence) may systematically undervalue employees whose contributions come through other means. Feedback delivered indirectly or infrequently may be difficult for neurodivergent employees to interpret and act upon.

Career progression pathways typically assume linear advancement through roles of increasing management responsibility. This structure may disadvantage neurodivergent employees who excel in technical domains but may not aspire to or thrive in management roles emphasizing social coordination. The "up or out" culture in some organizations may force talented neurodivergent employees to pursue management positions that do not leverage their strengths.

Cultural and Attitudinal Barriers

Perhaps the most pervasive barriers facing neurodivergent employees are cultural and attitudinal, reflecting stigma, misconceptions, and narrow definitions of professional behavior.

Stigma surrounding neurodevelopmental conditions remains prevalent despite increased awareness. Research documents that employers may hold negative stereotypes about autistic employees' capabilities (Kaye et al., 2011). Employees may fear disclosure of neurodivergent conditions due to concerns about discrimination, judgment, or reduced opportunities. Research has documented that disclosure decisions involve complex calculations weighing potential benefits (accessing accommodations, explaining behaviors, building understanding) against potential costs (stigmatization, reduced opportunities, changed relationships) (Lindsay et al., 2019).

Misconceptions about neurodivergence abound in workplace contexts. Autism may be stereotypically associated with savant abilities or extreme social withdrawal; ADHD may be dismissed as lack of discipline or motivation; dyslexia may be equated with low intelligence. These misconceptions create barriers to accurate understanding of individual employees' actual profiles of strengths and needs.

Organizational cultures often embed narrow definitions of professional behavior that may disadvantage neurodivergent employees. Expectations for appropriate demeanor (e.g., consistent cheerfulness, emotional regulation), communication style (e.g., diplomatic, socially smooth), and work patterns (e.g., consistent productivity across the day) reflect neurotypical norms that may not align with neurodivergent characteristics.

Challenges That May Be Less Environmentally Modifiable

While the social model of disability emphasizes environmental factors, it is important to acknowledge that some challenges neurodivergent individuals face may not be fully resolvable through environmental modification. Consistent with Shakespeare's (2006) critical realist perspective and Thomas's (2004) concept of impairment effects, some difficulties may involve genuine impairments that create challenges across multiple contexts:

- Some autistic individuals experience significant difficulties with cognitive flexibility that create challenges in unpredictable environments regardless of accommodations
- Some individuals with ADHD experience time perception difficulties that create challenges with time-sensitive tasks even with supports
- Some sensory experiences (e.g., sensory pain from particular stimuli) may not be fully addressable through environmental modification

Acknowledging these realities does not undermine the importance of environmental change but rather suggests that comprehensive support may require both environmental modification and individual-level strategies. The balance will vary across individuals and contexts.

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Impact of Workplace Challenges on Employee Wellbeing

The challenges and barriers described above have profound implications for neurodivergent employee wellbeing. This section examines evidence on mental health impacts, the phenomenon of burnout, effects on identity and self-concept, and career and economic consequences.

Mental Health Impacts

Research consistently documents elevated rates of mental health difficulties among neurodivergent adults compared to the general population. A systematic review and meta-analysis by Hollocks et al. (2019) found that autistic adults experience substantially higher rates of depression and anxiety than non-autistic adults, with lifetime prevalence estimates of approximately 40% for depression and up to 50% for anxiety disorders. Adults with ADHD similarly show elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions (Chen et al., 2018).

The etiology of these mental health difficulties is complex and likely involves multiple factors:

- *Neurobiological factors:* Some mental health vulnerability may be neurobiologically linked to neurodevelopmental conditions
- *Chronic stress:* Ongoing effort to navigate challenging environments and meet expectations not designed for neurodivergent individuals
- *Minority stress:* Experiences of stigma, discrimination, and marginalization analogous to minority stress documented in other populations
- *Masking costs:* The exhausting effort of suppressing authentic behaviors and adopting neurotypical performances

While some mental health difficulties may relate to neurobiological factors, workplace experiences appear to be significant contributors. Research by Cage et al. (2018) found that experiences of discrimination and barriers to participation in employment were associated with increased depression and anxiety among autistic adults.

Burnout and Exhaustion

Burnout—a state of chronic workplace stress characterized by exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced efficacy—has received increasing attention in neurodivergent populations. Research by Raymaker et al. (2020) has documented the distinct phenomenon of *autistic burnout*, characterized by chronic exhaustion, loss of skills, and reduced tolerance to stimulus. Autistic burnout appears to result from cumulative life stress and barriers, mismatch between expectations and abilities, and masking and camouflaging efforts.

Qualitative research has captured autistic adults' experiences of burnout vividly, with participants describing "hitting a wall," losing abilities they previously possessed, and requiring extended recovery periods (Higgins et al., 2021). Autistic burnout appears distinct from general occupational burnout while sharing some features, and may require different recovery strategies including reduced demands and increased accommodation rather than simple workload reduction.

Adults with ADHD also report high rates of burnout, potentially related to the chronic effort required to maintain attention and organization in environments not designed for ADHD cognitive patterns. The combination of working harder than neurotypical peers to achieve similar outcomes while receiving less recognition for that effort contributes to exhaustion and demoralization.

Positive Wellbeing and Flourishing

While the literature has primarily focused on negative outcomes, it is important to consider positive wellbeing—not merely the absence of distress but the presence of flourishing. Research has begun to examine factors associated with positive outcomes for neurodivergent individuals, including:

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- *Self-acceptance and positive identity:* Neurodivergent individuals who accept their neurological differences and develop positive neurodivergent identity report higher wellbeing (Cage et al., 2018)
- *Environmental fit:* Finding work environments and roles that align with individual strengths and preferences
- *Social support:* Having supportive relationships and community, including connections with other neurodivergent individuals
- *Meaning and purpose:* Engaging in work experienced as meaningful

Organizations can support positive wellbeing by creating conditions that facilitate these factors rather than focusing exclusively on reducing negative outcomes. Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of wellbeing—emphasizing positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment—provides a framework for considering multiple dimensions of flourishing that organizations might support.

Identity and Self-Concept Effects

Workplace experiences significantly shape neurodivergent employees' identities and self-concepts, with implications for wellbeing and career persistence. Employees who experience chronic failure, criticism, or marginalization may internalize deficit-based self-concepts, seeing themselves as fundamentally flawed rather than as individuals with particular characteristics navigating poorly designed environments.

The process of masking, while potentially adaptive in the short term, involves suppressing authentic aspects of self and can contribute to alienation from one's own identity. Research has suggested that prolonged masking is associated with identity confusion and reduced wellbeing (Cage et al., 2018). Conversely, environments that allow authentic expression and validate neurodivergent identities support more positive self-concepts.

Disclosure experiences shape identity development. Positive disclosure experiences—in which employees are met with understanding, support, and appropriate accommodations—can reinforce positive neurodivergent identity. Negative experiences—rejection, dismissal, or use of disclosed information against the employee—can reinforce shame and concealment.

The development of positive neurodivergent identity appears to be a protective factor for wellbeing. Organizations can support this process by creating cultures that validate neurodivergent identities, providing opportunities for community among neurodivergent employees, and challenging deficit narratives.

Career and Economic Consequences

The cumulative effect of workplace challenges manifests in career and economic disparities between neurodivergent and neurotypical employees. As noted previously, autistic adults experience unemployment and underemployment at substantially elevated rates. Research indicates that even when employed, autistic individuals are more likely to work part-time, work in positions below their educational level, and earn less than non-autistic peers (Shattuck et al., 2012).

Similar patterns appear for individuals with ADHD and learning differences, though research is less extensive. The combination of workplace challenges, mental health impacts, and burnout contributes to job instability, with many neurodivergent individuals experiencing frequent job changes, gaps in employment, and progressive disengagement from the labor market.

These employment difficulties have cascading effects on economic security, housing, relationships, and overall quality of life. They also represent a loss for organizations and society, as talented individuals are unable to contribute their skills and perspectives fully.

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Organizational Practices Supporting Neurodivergent Employee Wellbeing

This section examines organizational practices that have been proposed or demonstrated to support neurodivergent employee wellbeing. Importantly, evidence quality varies substantially across practices, and the discussion distinguishes between practices supported by stronger versus weaker evidence. Practices span physical and sensory accommodations, communication and social support, work structure and flexibility, recruitment and career development practices, and organizational culture change. Table 1 provides a summary of key practices and their evidence base.

Evidence Quality Considerations

Before reviewing specific practices, it is essential to note limitations in the evidence base:

- *Limited controlled research:* Few practices have been evaluated through rigorous experimental or quasi-experimental designs; most evidence comes from case studies, surveys, or qualitative research
- *Self-report reliance:* Many studies rely on self-reported outcomes that may be subject to response bias
- *Sample limitations:* Research often involves small, non-representative samples, limiting generalizability
- *Publication bias:* Positive findings may be more likely to be published and publicized than null or negative results
- *Short timeframes:* Many studies examine short-term outcomes, with limited evidence on sustainability

The following discussion characterizes evidence strength where possible, but readers should interpret recommendations cautiously given these limitations.

Table 1. Summary of Organizational Practices and Evidence Base.

Practice Domain	Specific Practices	Evidence Quality	Key Sources
Physical/Sensory Accommodations			
	Quiet workspaces	Moderate	Robertson & Simmons (2013); Solovieva et al. (2011)
	Lighting adjustments	Limited-Moderate	Qualitative studies; practitioner reports
	Noise-canceling equipment	Moderate	Job Accommodation Network data
	Sensory-friendly policies	Limited	Practitioner reports
Communication/Social Support			
	Written instructions	Moderate	Scott et al. (2015)
	Meeting accommodations	Limited-Moderate	Qualitative research
	Mentoring programs	Moderate	Dipeolu et al. (2015)
	Peer support networks	Limited-Moderate	Qualitative research

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Practice Domain	Specific Practices	Evidence Quality	Key Sources
Flexible Work Arrangements			
	Remote/hybrid work	Moderate-Strong	Schur et al. (2020); Oomen et al. (2022)
	Flexible scheduling	Moderate	General flexibility research; limited ND-specific
	Results-based evaluation	Limited	Conceptual support; limited empirical
Recruitment/Career Development			
	Modified interviews	Moderate	Maras et al. (2021)
	Work sample assessments	Moderate-Strong	Austin & Pisano (2017)
	Neurodiversity hiring programs	Moderate	Austin & Pisano (2017); organizational case studies
	Alternative career pathways	Limited	Conceptual support
Technology Support			
	Assistive technology	Moderate-Strong	Job Accommodation Network; AT research
	AI-powered tools	Emerging	Limited research; early adoption
	Communication platforms	Limited	User experience reports
Culture/Leadership			
	Awareness training	Limited-Moderate	Mixed findings on training efficacy
	Psychological safety	Moderate	General PS research; limited ND-specific
	Leadership commitment	Limited	Case studies; conceptual support

Note. Evidence quality ratings: Strong = multiple rigorous studies with consistent findings; Moderate = survey/qualitative research with consistent findings or limited controlled studies; Limited = primarily conceptual, case studies, or practitioner reports; Emerging = very recent research or technology with insufficient evaluation.

Physical and Sensory Accommodations

Modifying physical and sensory environments represents one of the most direct approaches to supporting neurodivergent employees. *Evidence quality for sensory accommodations is moderate*, based primarily on survey and qualitative research documenting employee preferences and self-reported benefits, with limited controlled outcome research.

Workspace modifications that research suggests may enhance neurodivergent employee wellbeing and productivity include:

- *Quiet spaces:* Providing quiet workspaces or rooms where employees can work without auditory distraction; some organizations have implemented "library rules" zones within otherwise open offices
- *Private or semi-private workstations:* Offering alternatives to fully open desk arrangements, such as high-walled cubicles, private offices, or work pods

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- *Noise-reducing accommodations:* Providing noise-cancelling headphones, allowing personal music, or implementing acoustic treatments
- *Lighting adjustments:* Offering alternatives to fluorescent lighting, providing desk lamps, allowing sunglasses, or positioning workstations near windows for natural light
- *Sensory considerations:* Using unscented cleaning products, establishing fragrance-free policies, and allowing modifications to reduce sensory input

Research by Job Accommodation Network data indicates that workplace accommodations are frequently low-cost or no-cost while employers report significant benefits in terms of retained productivity and avoided turnover costs (Solovieva et al., 2011). However, this evidence is based on employer surveys without controlled comparison groups, representing moderate-quality evidence.

Many accommodations that support neurodivergent employees—such as quiet spaces or flexible lighting—may benefit all employees, supporting a universal design approach that reduces the need for individual accommodation requests.

Communication and Social Support

Organizational practices addressing communication and social dynamics can support neurodivergent employee wellbeing. *Evidence quality is moderate to limited*, based primarily on qualitative research and practitioner reports.

Communication accommodations that may support neurodivergent employees include:

- *Written instructions and documentation:* Providing clear written summaries of expectations, procedures, and task assignments rather than relying solely on verbal communication
- *Meeting agendas and materials in advance:* Sharing topics, documents, and expectations before meetings to allow processing time
- *Clear, direct communication:* Encouraging explicit, unambiguous communication rather than relying on hints or implications
- *Multiple communication channels:* Allowing employees to communicate through their preferred modalities (written, verbal, video) rather than requiring particular formats
- *Processing time:* Accepting that some employees may need time to formulate responses rather than expecting immediate verbal replies

Social support structures can help neurodivergent employees navigate workplace social demands:

- *Mentoring programs:* Pairing neurodivergent employees with experienced colleagues who can provide guidance on workplace norms and expectations
- *Peer support networks:* Facilitating connections among neurodivergent employees for mutual support and community, often through employee resource groups
- *Clear social expectations:* Making implicit social rules explicit rather than expecting employees to absorb them through observation
- *Social opt-outs:* Respecting preferences to limit participation in social events without stigma

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Work Structure and Flexibility

Flexible work arrangements and task structures can enhance fit between neurodivergent employees and their roles. *Evidence quality is moderate*, with stronger evidence for general flexible work benefits and emerging evidence specific to neurodivergent employees.

Flexible work arrangements supporting neurodivergent employees include:

- *Flexible scheduling:* Allowing adjustment of work hours to align with individual productivity patterns and energy levels; some individuals with ADHD, for example, report peak productivity at non-traditional times
- *Remote work options:* Enabling work from home where employees can control their sensory environment, reduce commuting stress, and minimize social demands
- *Results-based evaluation:* Focusing on work outputs rather than presence or adherence to particular work patterns
- *Break flexibility:* Allowing self-directed breaks for sensory regulation, movement, or recovery from demanding tasks

Task and role accommodations can enhance role fit:

- *Playing to strengths:* Assigning tasks that leverage individual strengths while providing support or reassignment for tasks that create significant difficulty
- *Task chunking:* Breaking large projects into smaller, clearly defined steps with interim deadlines
- *Reduced task-switching:* Where possible, allowing focused work on single tasks rather than requiring constant switching
- *Extended time:* Providing additional time for tasks where processing speed differences create challenges

Disclosure and Accommodation Processes

How organizations handle disclosure and accommodation requests significantly affects neurodivergent employees' experiences and willingness to seek support. *Evidence quality is moderate*, based primarily on qualitative research.

Neurodivergent employees navigate complex decisions about whether, when, to whom, and how much to disclose:

- *Whether to disclose:* Weighing potential benefits (accommodations, understanding) against potential risks (discrimination, judgment, changed relationships)
- *When to disclose:* During application, at hiring, during onboarding, after performance concerns arise, or not at all
- *To whom to disclose:* HR, direct manager, colleagues, clients—with different implications for each
- *How much to disclose:* Specific diagnosis, general neurodivergence, or simply specific needs without explanation

Organizations can support positive disclosure experiences by:

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- *Creating psychologically safe cultures:* Signaling openness to neurodiversity and non-discrimination
- *Offering multiple disclosure pathways:* Formal HR channels, informal manager conversations, or anonymous needs assessment
- *Separating disclosure from diagnosis:* Allowing employees to request specific accommodations without requiring medical documentation in all cases
- *Training managers:* Preparing managers to respond supportively and confidentially
- *Monitoring for discrimination:* Actively preventing adverse consequences following disclosure

It is important to acknowledge that organizations cannot fully eliminate disclosure risks, and some neurodivergent employees may reasonably conclude that non-disclosure is safer in their context. Research documents that disclosure can sometimes lead to discrimination even in ostensibly supportive organizations (Lindsay et al., 2019). Organizations should work to reduce these risks while respecting individual disclosure decisions.

Inclusive Recruitment and Career Development

Addressing barriers in recruitment, selection, and career development is essential for ensuring neurodivergent individuals can access employment opportunities and progress in their careers. *Evidence quality is moderate for recruitment modifications*, based on research from specialized programs and hiring research.

Inclusive recruitment practices include:

- *Job advertisement review:* Examining job postings for unnecessary requirements that may screen out neurodivergent candidates (e.g., "excellent communication skills" when written communication would suffice) and for language that may discourage application
- *Alternative application formats:* Allowing applications through multiple formats rather than requiring standard forms
- *Interview modifications:* Providing questions in advance, offering written rather than verbal formats, extending time, allowing breaks, and focusing questions on job-relevant competencies rather than social fluency
- *Work sample assessments:* Evaluating candidates based on actual job-relevant tasks rather than interview performance
- *Internship and trial programs:* Providing opportunities for candidates and employers to assess fit through practical experience rather than relying solely on selection processes

Several major organizations have implemented dedicated neurodiversity hiring programs. Austin and Pisano (2017) documented programs at SAP, Microsoft, EY, and other organizations that have redesigned recruitment and onboarding processes to better identify and support neurodivergent talent. These programs typically extend assessment periods, provide enhanced onboarding support, and train managers in neurodiversity awareness.

Career development practices supporting neurodivergent employees include:

- *Alternative career pathways:* Creating advancement opportunities that do not require progression into management roles for those whose strengths lie in technical or specialist contributions

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- *Explicit feedback:* Providing clear, specific, and regular feedback on performance rather than relying on subtle cues
- *Individualized development plans:* Working with employees to identify career goals and support needs rather than applying standardized development frameworks
- *Promotion criteria review:* Examining whether advancement criteria embed neurotypical assumptions about leadership or professional behavior

Organizational Culture and Leadership

Perhaps most fundamentally, supporting neurodivergent employee wellbeing requires changes to organizational culture—the shared assumptions, values, and norms that shape how work is understood and conducted. *Evidence quality is limited*, as cultural factors are difficult to isolate and evaluate experimentally.

Culture change initiatives supporting neurodiversity include:

- *Leadership commitment:* Visible commitment from senior leaders to neurodiversity as a valued dimension of workforce diversity
- *Awareness and training:* Educating managers and employees about neurodiversity, challenging misconceptions, and building understanding of how to work effectively with neurodivergent colleagues
- *Psychological safety:* Creating environments in which employees feel safe to disclose neurodivergence, request accommodations, and express authentic identities without fear of negative consequences
- *Challenging normative assumptions:* Questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about "professional" behavior, communication, or work style that may reflect neurotypical norms rather than job requirements
- *Celebrating diverse contributions:* Recognizing and valuing the different perspectives and approaches that neurodivergent employees bring

Managers play a particularly critical role in shaping neurodivergent employees' experiences. Research suggests that manager understanding and support is one of the most significant factors in neurodivergent employee wellbeing and retention. Effective managers:

- Understand individual employees' strengths and challenges
- Provide clear expectations and regular feedback
- Advocate for accommodations and support
- Create psychologically safe team environments
- Focus on results rather than conformity to normative behaviors

Individual Factors and Self-Advocacy

While organizational factors are the focus of this article, it is important to acknowledge that individual factors also influence neurodivergent employees' workplace experiences and wellbeing. Research suggests that self-advocacy skills, self-understanding, and proactive coping strategies are important predictors of employment success (Dipeolu et al., 2015).

Relevant individual factors include:

- *Self-awareness:* Understanding one's own strengths, challenges, and needs

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- *Self-advocacy:* Ability to articulate needs and request appropriate support
- *Coping strategies:* Proactive approaches to managing workplace challenges
- *Identity and acceptance:* Positive neurodivergent identity and self-acceptance

Organizations can support development of these individual factors through coaching, mentoring, and peer support programs, without placing undue responsibility on individual employees for navigating inaccessible environments. The appropriate balance between organizational and individual responsibility remains a point of tension, as discussed in subsequent sections.

Technology, Remote Work, and Evolving Work Arrangements

The rapid evolution of workplace technology and the normalization of remote and hybrid work following the COVID-19 pandemic have significant implications for neurodivergent employees. This section examines assistive and enabling technologies, the impact of remote and hybrid work, emerging technologies including artificial intelligence, and considerations for organizations navigating these changes.

Assistive and Enabling Technologies

Technology has long played a role in supporting neurodivergent individuals, and the range of available tools continues to expand. Assistive technology can address specific functional differences, while enabling technologies support productivity and wellbeing more broadly.

Assistive technologies for reading and writing differences:

- *Text-to-speech software:* Enables individuals with dyslexia or reading difficulties to consume written content auditorily
- *Speech-to-text software:* Supports those who find verbal expression easier than writing
- *Grammar and spelling tools:* Enhanced proofreading tools with dyslexia-friendly features
- *Reading assistance:* Screen overlays, font modifications, and text formatting that improve readability

Assistive technologies for attention and executive function:

- *Task management applications:* Digital tools for organizing tasks, setting reminders, and tracking progress
- *Time management tools:* Visual timers, scheduling applications, and time-blocking software
- *Focus applications:* Website blockers, distraction-minimizing tools, and focus-enhancing applications
- *Note-taking tools:* Recording, transcription, and organization tools for meetings and learning

Assistive technologies for sensory and communication needs:

- *Noise-masking applications:* White noise, brown noise, or ambient sound applications
- *Communication support:* Visual communication tools, AAC (augmentative and alternative communication) devices
- *Environmental control:* Smart office tools for adjusting lighting, temperature, or other environmental factors

Research from the Job Accommodation Network indicates that technology accommodations are among the most commonly requested and most effective workplace accommodations (Solovieva et

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al., 2011). Evidence quality for specific assistive technologies varies, with stronger evidence for established tools (e.g., text-to-speech) and emerging evidence for newer applications.

Organizations can support technology use by:

- Providing access to assistive technology as standard practice rather than requiring individual justification
- Offering training on available tools
- Allowing use of personal preferred technology where compatible with organizational systems
- Involving neurodivergent employees in technology selection

Remote and Hybrid Work

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically accelerated adoption of remote work, with significant implications for neurodivergent employees. Research conducted during and after the pandemic has documented mixed experiences that merit nuanced consideration.

Potential benefits of remote work for neurodivergent employees:

- *Environmental control:* Ability to manage sensory environment, including lighting, noise, and temperature
- *Reduced sensory demands:* Elimination of commuting stress and open-office sensory challenges
- *Communication flexibility:* Written communication may be preferred by some; reduced pressure for real-time verbal interaction
- *Reduced masking demands:* Less pressure to maintain neurotypical social performances
- *Schedule flexibility:* Ability to work during peak productivity periods and take breaks as needed
- *Reduced social demands:* Fewer demands for office small talk and social events

Research by Schur et al. (2020) found that employees with disabilities, including neurodevelopmental disabilities, reported improved work experiences during the pandemic remote work period. Oomen et al. (2022) documented that autistic adults reported both benefits and challenges from pandemic-era changes, with many expressing preference for continued remote work options.

Potential challenges of remote work for neurodivergent employees:

- *Executive function demands:* Self-management of time, structure, and boundaries may be challenging for some individuals with ADHD or autism
- *Social isolation:* Reduced connection with colleagues and organizational community
- *Blurred boundaries:* Difficulty separating work and personal life, potentially contributing to burnout
- *Communication challenges:* Video calls may create different but not necessarily reduced demands; technical difficulties may be stressful
- *Loss of routine and structure:* Office attendance provides external structure that some neurodivergent individuals find helpful
- *Reduced visibility:* Remote workers may be overlooked for opportunities or recognition

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The heterogeneity of neurodivergent profiles means that remote work is not universally beneficial or challenging. Individual preferences and needs should guide work arrangement decisions.

Organizational implications:

- Offer genuine choice in work arrangements rather than mandating either remote or in-office work
- Provide support for remote work challenges (e.g., structure, connection, boundaries) rather than assuming remote work is uniformly easy
- Ensure remote workers receive equal consideration for opportunities, feedback, and recognition
- Address the implications of return-to-office mandates for employees who benefited from remote work
- Consider hybrid arrangements that offer the benefits of both in-person and remote work

The post-pandemic period has seen some organizations mandate return to office, creating anxiety for neurodivergent employees who experienced significant wellbeing improvements with remote work. Organizations should consider whether blanket return-to-office policies are necessary or whether accommodation of continued remote work is appropriate for employees with documented needs.

Emerging Technologies: Artificial Intelligence and Beyond

Emerging technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI), present both opportunities and challenges for neurodivergent employees that merit consideration despite limited research to date.

Potential benefits of AI for neurodivergent employees:

- *Writing assistance:* AI writing tools can support drafting, editing, and tone adjustment, potentially benefiting those with dyslexia or who find writing challenging
- *Scheduling and organization:* AI-powered scheduling and task management tools may support executive function
- *Communication support:* AI tools that summarize meetings, transcribe discussions, or suggest responses may reduce cognitive load
- *Personalization:* AI systems that adapt to individual preferences and patterns may enhance accessibility
- *Information processing:* AI tools that summarize, synthesize, or extract key information may support information processing differences

Potential challenges and concerns:

- *Bias in AI systems:* AI systems trained on neurotypical data may embed neurotypical assumptions and disadvantage neurodivergent users or applicants
- *AI in hiring:* AI screening of resumes or video interviews may systematically disadvantage neurodivergent candidates if systems are trained to identify "typical" presentations
- *Surveillance:* AI-powered workplace monitoring may create stress and disadvantage employees whose work patterns differ from monitored norms

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- *Displacement:* AI automation may disproportionately affect roles currently occupied by neurodivergent workers
- *Accessibility of AI tools:* AI interfaces may not be accessible to all neurodivergent users

Organizational considerations:

- Audit AI systems used in hiring and performance management for potential neurodiversity bias
- Provide neurodivergent employees with access to beneficial AI tools
- Involve neurodivergent employees in evaluation and selection of AI technologies
- Monitor for unintended consequences of AI implementation on neurodivergent employees

Research on AI and neurodiversity is nascent, and organizations should proceed thoughtfully as these technologies evolve.

Digital Workplace Challenges

The proliferation of digital tools and platforms in contemporary workplaces creates both opportunities and challenges for neurodivergent employees:

Communication platform overload:

- Multiple communication channels (email, instant messaging, video calls, project management tools) create cognitive load
- Expectations for rapid response across platforms may be challenging for those with processing differences
- Notifications and interruptions fragment attention

Video call fatigue:

- Video calls impose particular demands including sustained eye contact (or appearance thereof), real-time processing, and self-monitoring
- "Zoom fatigue" may be amplified for neurodivergent individuals
- Reduced non-verbal cues in video compared to in-person interaction

Digital information overload:

- High volumes of digital information require filtering, prioritization, and organization
- Rapid pace of digital communication may disadvantage those who prefer time to process

Organizations can address these challenges by:

- Establishing norms around response times and communication channel usage
- Reducing unnecessary meetings and communications
- Allowing asynchronous communication alternatives to real-time video calls
- Providing training and tools for digital information management

Temporal Dynamics: Career Stages, Late Diagnosis, and Initiative Sustainability

Understanding how neurodivergent employment experiences evolve over time is essential for developing effective organizational practices. This section examines temporal dynamics including

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career stage differences, late diagnosis experiences, and the sustainability of organizational initiatives.

Career Stage Considerations

Neurodivergent employees' needs and experiences vary across career stages, suggesting the need for stage-appropriate support:

Entry and early career:

- *Transition challenges:* Moving from education to employment involves significant adjustment; neurodivergent individuals may face heightened challenges navigating new social environments and unwritten expectations
- *Skill development:* Early career often involves developing workplace competencies that may be particularly challenging for neurodivergent individuals (e.g., professional communication, organizational politics)
- *Identity development:* Early career is often a period of professional identity formation; positive experiences can foster sustainable career engagement while negative experiences may lead to early exit
- *Support needs:* Intensive onboarding support, mentoring, and explicit guidance on workplace norms may be particularly valuable
- *Exploration:* Early career allows exploration of role and environment fit; neurodivergent individuals may benefit from opportunities to discover what works for them

Mid-career:

- *Advancement decisions:* Mid-career often involves decisions about advancement; neurodivergent individuals may face tensions between technical expertise and management expectations
- *Accumulated burden:* Years of masking and adaptation may contribute to burnout that manifests in mid-career
- *Expertise recognition:* Deep expertise developed through sustained interest should be recognized and valued
- *Stability needs:* By mid-career, neurodivergent employees may have developed understanding of their needs and effective accommodations

Late career:

- *Generativity:* Experienced neurodivergent employees can mentor newcomers and contribute to organizational learning
- *Accommodation evolution:* Needs may change with age, including potential changes in sensory tolerance, energy levels, or health
- *Legacy and transition:* Planning for retirement or transition may require particular support
- *Recognition:* Late career contributions deserve recognition regardless of conformity to typical career patterns

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Organizations should consider how support and development programs address needs across career stages rather than assuming uniform needs.

Late Diagnosis and Newly Identified Employees

Many neurodivergent individuals receive diagnosis in adulthood, sometimes after years or decades of workplace experience without understanding their neurodivergent identity. Late diagnosis experiences have particular implications:

Late diagnosis experiences:

- *Reframing past experiences:* Late diagnosis often prompts reinterpretation of career history, including understanding previous challenges and successes in new ways
- *Identity reconstruction:* Developing neurodivergent identity later in life involves integrating new self-understanding with established professional identity
- *Accommodation uncertainty:* Newly diagnosed employees may be uncertain about what accommodations to request or whether they are entitled to support
- *Disclosure decisions:* Decisions about disclosing newly identified neurodivergence in established work relationships are particularly complex
- *Grief and relief:* Late diagnosis often involves mixed emotions, including grief for earlier difficulties and relief at understanding oneself

Organizational support for late-diagnosed employees:

- Ensure accommodation processes are accessible to those without childhood diagnosis histories
- Provide resources and support for employees navigating new understanding of neurodivergence
- Train HR and managers to respond supportively to employees who disclose recent diagnosis
- Connect newly diagnosed employees with peer support and employee resource groups

Research on late diagnosis and employment is limited, representing an important area for future investigation.

Sustainability of Organizational Initiatives

Organizational neurodiversity initiatives face sustainability challenges that affect long-term impact:

Factors threatening sustainability:

- *Leadership transitions:* Initiatives championed by particular leaders may lose momentum when those leaders depart
- *Economic pressures:* During economic downturns, diversity and inclusion initiatives may face budget cuts
- *Initiative fatigue:* Organizations may cycle through diversity priorities, with neurodiversity receiving attention temporarily before focus shifts
- *Measurement difficulties:* Difficulty demonstrating ROI may undermine continued investment

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- *Mainstreaming challenges:* Moving from specialized programs to mainstream practice is difficult

Strategies for sustainability:

- *Institutionalization:* Embedding neurodiversity support in policies, processes, and job descriptions rather than relying on individual champions
- *Measurement systems:* Developing appropriate metrics for tracking neurodiversity outcomes, while acknowledging measurement limitations
- *Resource commitment:* Securing dedicated budget and staffing for neurodiversity initiatives
- *Stakeholder engagement:* Building broad coalitions of support across the organization
- *Integration with broader inclusion efforts:* Connecting neurodiversity to broader diversity, equity, and inclusion frameworks
- *Neurodivergent leadership:* Developing neurodivergent leaders who can sustain and advance initiatives

Evidence on sustainability: Research on the long-term sustainability of organizational neurodiversity initiatives is limited. Austin and Pisano (2017) documented initiatives at major technology companies, but long-term follow-up on these programs is sparse. Anecdotal evidence suggests variable sustainability, with some programs expanding and others contracting. This represents a significant gap in the evidence base.

Evolution of Neurodivergent Employee Needs

Individual neurodivergent employees' needs are not static but evolve over time:

- *Learning and adaptation:* With experience, neurodivergent employees may develop strategies and skills that reduce some accommodation needs
- *Changing roles:* As employees change roles or advance, accommodation needs may change
- *Life circumstances:* Personal circumstances (health changes, caregiving responsibilities, relationship changes) affect workplace needs
- *Burnout recovery:* Following burnout, needs may be temporarily or permanently elevated
- *Technology changes:* New technologies may create new challenges or new supports

Organizations should build flexibility into accommodation processes, recognizing that needs documented at one point may evolve.

Tensions, Trade-offs, and Unintended Consequences

Organizational neurodiversity practices involve genuine tensions, trade-offs, and potential unintended consequences that deserve explicit attention. This section critically examines these complexities to provide a more balanced analysis than purely positive accounts of neurodiversity initiatives.

Accommodation vs. Universal Design

Two approaches to supporting neurodivergent employees may conflict: individualized accommodations (specific adjustments for identified individuals) and universal design (creating environments that work for diverse users by default). Resources and attention devoted to individualized accommodations may reduce pressure for universal design changes that would

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benefit all employees. Conversely, universal design approaches may not address specific individual needs that differ from general patterns.

Organizations must navigate this tension by:

- Prioritizing universal design changes where feasible
- Maintaining individualized accommodation processes for needs not addressed by universal design
- Recognizing that some combination is typically necessary

Specialized Programs vs. Mainstream Inclusion

Some organizations create specialized roles, teams, or programs for neurodivergent employees (e.g., autism-specific hiring programs placing individuals in particular technical roles), while others emphasize integrating neurodivergent employees throughout the organization. These approaches have different trade-offs:

Specialized programs may:

Provide better-tailored support and environments

- Create community among neurodivergent employees
- Risk segregation and stereotyping
- Benefit only those whose profiles match program criteria
- Reduce pressure for broader organizational change

Mainstream inclusion may:

- Integrate neurodivergent employees throughout the organization
- Promote culture change across the organization
- Risk inadequate support if mainstream environments remain inaccessible
- Require more extensive manager training and culture change

Neither approach is universally superior; appropriate approaches depend on organizational context, resources, and goals.

Disclosure Risks and Organizational Responsibility

Encouraging disclosure creates ethical complexities. Organizations may signal openness to disclosure, but employees who disclose face genuine risks of discrimination, changed relationships, and reduced opportunities. Research documents that disclosure does not always lead to positive outcomes (Lindsay et al., 2019).

Organizations face tensions between:

- Encouraging disclosure to enable appropriate support
- Acknowledging that they cannot fully protect employees from disclosure risks
- Respecting individual autonomy in disclosure decisions

Responsible approaches involve honestly communicating both potential benefits and risks of disclosure, working actively to reduce disclosure risks, and respecting employees who choose not to disclose.

Neurodiversity Initiatives and Other Equity Efforts

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Neurodiversity initiatives exist alongside other diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. Potential tensions include:

- *Resource competition:* Resources devoted to neurodiversity may reduce resources for other equity efforts
- *Intersectionality gaps:* Neurodiversity initiatives may inadequately address intersection of neurodivergence with gender, race, or other dimensions
- *Hierarchy of disabilities:* Emphasis on neurodivergent individuals who can be productive in specific roles may marginalize other disabled people

Organizations should situate neurodiversity initiatives within broader equity frameworks and attend to intersectional considerations.

Accommodation Effects on Coworkers

Accommodations for neurodivergent employees may affect coworkers in ways that create tensions:

- Remote work accommodations may shift burdens to on-site colleagues
- Noise accommodations (playing music, conversation restrictions) affect shared spaces
- Task redistribution may change coworker workloads
- Flexibility accommodations may be perceived as unfair by those without formal accommodations

Organizations should:

- Consider accommodation impacts on teams
- Communicate thoughtfully about accommodations (balancing transparency and privacy)
- Extend flexibility to all employees where possible rather than creating neurodivergent-specific exceptions
- Address perceptions of unfairness proactively

Productivity Framing and Conditional Acceptance

The business case for neurodiversity, while strategically useful, involves risks:

- *Conditional acceptance:* Framing neurodivergent employees as valuable because of productivity may imply they are not valuable if not productive
- *Stereotype reinforcement:* Emphasis on particular strengths (e.g., autistic attention to detail) may reinforce stereotypes and marginalize those who do not fit
- *Hierarchy among neurodivergent people:* Those whose profiles match valued roles may be included while others remain marginalized

Critical disability scholars have argued that rights-based frameworks emphasizing human dignity regardless of productivity are more appropriate foundations for inclusion than business case arguments (Runswick-Cole et al., 2016). Organizations might articulate both rights-based and business case rationales while being attentive to the risks of productivity framing.

Authenticity vs. Professional Expectations

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The neurodiversity movement values authentic expression and critiques masking, but all workplaces involve some behavioral expectations. Tensions exist regarding:

- Where the line falls between reasonable professional expectations and problematic conformity demands
- Whether particular behavioral expectations are genuinely job-relevant or reflect arbitrary neurotypical norms
- How to balance neurodivergent employees' authenticity with coworker and client expectations

There is no simple resolution to these tensions. Organizations can examine which behavioral expectations are truly necessary and which reflect arbitrary norms, but some professional expectations will remain, and neurodivergent employees may need to navigate some degree of adaptation.

Implementation Challenges

Translating neurodiversity principles into practice faces practical challenges:

- *Manager capability:* Many managers lack training and confidence to support neurodivergent employees effectively
- *Resource constraints:* Smaller organizations may have limited capacity for comprehensive initiatives
- *Competing priorities:* Neurodiversity may compete with other organizational priorities for attention and resources
- *Measurement difficulties:* Evaluating neurodiversity initiative effectiveness is challenging given small populations, disclosure issues, and long timeframes for outcomes
- *Sustainability:* Initiatives may lose momentum during economic downturns or leadership transitions

Organizations should anticipate these challenges and develop realistic implementation plans rather than announcing aspirational commitments without implementation capacity.

Stakeholder Perspectives

While neurodivergent employees are the central stakeholders in neurodiversity initiatives, other stakeholders have perspectives, interests, and needs that affect implementation. This section examines perspectives of managers, coworkers, and other relevant stakeholders.

Manager Perspectives and Needs

Managers bear primary responsibility for implementing accommodations, providing feedback, and creating inclusive team environments. Research suggests that managers often feel underprepared for these responsibilities and face genuine challenges:

- *Knowledge gaps:* Many managers have limited understanding of neurodiversity and may rely on stereotypes or misconceptions
- *Skill gaps:* Managing neurodivergent employees may require different approaches than managers have developed

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- *Time pressures:* Individualized management approaches require time that may compete with other responsibilities
- *Role conflicts:* Managers may experience tension between supporting individual employees and meeting team or organizational goals
- *Evaluation uncertainty:* Managers may be unsure how to fairly evaluate performance given different working styles

Organizations should support managers through:

- Training on neurodiversity awareness and management approaches
- Coaching and consultation resources
- Peer learning opportunities among managers
- Clear organizational expectations and support for inclusive management
- Recognizing and rewarding effective inclusive management

Research suggests that manager support is one of the strongest predictors of neurodivergent employee retention and wellbeing, making manager development a high-priority investment.

Coworker Perspectives

Neurotypical coworkers interact with neurodivergent colleagues daily and may have diverse reactions:

- *Supportive responses:* Many coworkers respond positively, appreciating diverse perspectives and wanting to be supportive
- *Confusion or frustration:* Communication differences or behavioral patterns may create misunderstandings
- *Perceptions of unfairness:* Accommodations may be perceived as unfair special treatment
- *Relationship challenges:* Social differences may create challenges in building collegial relationships

Organizations can support positive coworker dynamics through:

- Team-level neurodiversity awareness (while respecting individual privacy regarding disclosure)
- Extending flexibility to all employees where possible
- Facilitating communication about team norms and expectations
- Addressing concerns about fairness proactively

Research specifically examining coworker perspectives on neurodivergent colleagues is limited, representing a gap in the literature.

Client and Customer Considerations

In client-facing roles, neurodivergent employees interact with external stakeholders whose expectations may create additional challenges:

- Clients may have expectations for communication styles or relationship behaviors that differ from neurodivergent employees' natural approaches
- Client expectations may be less modifiable than internal organizational practices

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- Disclosure decisions become more complex when clients are involved

Organizations can support neurodivergent employees in client-facing roles through:

- Selecting client relationships that are good fits for individual employee strengths
- Providing support for client communication (e.g., templates, coaching)
- Educating clients about diverse communication styles where appropriate
- Having alternative arrangements when particular client relationships are not workable

Family and Support Networks

Family members and personal support networks often provide crucial support for neurodivergent individuals navigating employment. While outside organizational boundaries, employers can acknowledge these support systems and, where appropriate, engage them in transition planning, accommodation discussions (with employee consent), or support coordination.

The Business Case: A Critical Analysis

While ethical imperatives for inclusion should be sufficient motivation, organizations have increasingly articulated business benefits associated with neurodiversity initiatives. This section examines evidence on business benefits while critically analyzing limitations and risks of business case framing.

Performance and Innovation Claims

Proponents argue that neurodivergent employees bring distinctive capabilities that enhance organizational performance. Documented claims include:

- *Quality assurance and testing:* Autistic individuals' attention to detail and pattern recognition has proven valuable in software testing, quality control, and data analysis roles (Austin & Pisano, 2017)
- *Innovation:* ADHD's association with divergent thinking may contribute to innovation (White & Shah, 2011)
- *Unique perspectives:* Cognitive diversity may contribute to better problem-solving (Hewlett et al., 2013)

Austin and Pisano (2017) documented that dedicated neurodiversity programs at SAP, HPE, and Microsoft had demonstrated productivity gains among neurodivergent employees in targeted roles.

However, these claims warrant critical scrutiny:

- *Selection effects:* Neurodiversity hiring programs often target specific roles where neurodivergent strengths are expected; results may not generalize to other contexts
- *Small samples:* Evidence often comes from small programs at a few pioneering organizations
- *Publication bias:* Organizations may publicize successes while failures go unreported
- *Comparison groups:* It is often unclear whether neurodivergent employees in these programs outperform neurotypical comparison groups or simply perform well in absolute terms
- *Sustainability:* Long-term outcomes and program sustainability are less documented than initial successes

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Talent Acquisition and Retention

In competitive talent markets, organizations that successfully recruit and retain neurodivergent employees may gain access to underutilized talent pools. Given that neurodivergent individuals may comprise 15% to 20% of the population, organizations with inaccessible environments may screen out substantial talent.

Retention benefits may be significant. Turnover costs—including recruitment, training, and lost productivity during transitions—are substantial (Boushey & Glynn, 2012). Neurodivergent employees who find supportive workplace environments may demonstrate high loyalty and tenure.

However, these arguments assume:

- Organizations can effectively identify and support neurodivergent talent
- Neurodivergent employees' contributions outweigh accommodation costs (a problematic framing, as discussed below)
- Competitive labor markets where talent scarcity matters

Return on Accommodation Investment

Research consistently demonstrates that workplace accommodations are typically low-cost. Job Accommodation Network data indicates that most accommodations cost nothing or have modest costs (Solovieva et al., 2011).

However, this evidence is based on employer surveys without controlled comparison groups, and accommodation costs may be underestimated if indirect costs (manager time, coworker adjustments) are not fully captured.

Critical Perspectives on Business Case Framing

Critical disability scholars and neurodiversity advocates have raised concerns about business case framing:

Conditional acceptance: When inclusion is justified by productivity benefits, acceptance becomes conditional on demonstrating economic value. This framing may exclude neurodivergent individuals who cannot or do not wish to be maximally productive, and reinforces the problematic idea that human worth depends on economic contribution. From a critical perspective informed by disability rights traditions, inclusion should not be contingent on productivity.

Stereotype reinforcement: Emphasizing particular strengths (autistic attention to detail, ADHD creativity) reinforces stereotypes and creates pressure for neurodivergent individuals to perform these expected strengths. Those whose profiles differ may face marginalization.

Hierarchy among neurodivergent people: Business case framing may create implicit hierarchies, with neurodivergent individuals who can be placed in productivity-enhancing roles valued more than those who cannot.

Neoliberal alignment: Some scholars argue that the business case aligns neurodiversity advocacy with neoliberal logics of productivity and human capital, potentially coopting a radical disability rights movement into service of capitalism (Runswick-Cole et al., 2016). Rose (2007) has analyzed how contemporary governance operates through the optimization of human capital, suggesting that neurodiversity initiatives emphasizing productivity may inadvertently reinforce these governing logics rather than challenging them.

Alternative Framings

Alternatives to business case framing include:

- *Rights-based frameworks:* Inclusion is required by human rights and dignity, independent of productivity benefits
- *Social justice frameworks:* Inclusion addresses historical marginalization and discrimination

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- *Holistic value frameworks:* All employees, regardless of productivity, contribute to organizational community and deserve support

Organizations might articulate multiple framings while remaining attentive to the risks of emphasizing productivity above other values.

Structural and Policy Factors

While this article focuses on organizational practices, broader structural and policy factors significantly shape neurodivergent employment outcomes. Focusing exclusively on organizational interventions risks overlooking systemic issues and placing excessive burden on individual employers. This section examines structural and policy considerations.

Political-Economic Context

Contemporary workplace characteristics create particular challenges for neurodivergent workers that individual organizational accommodations may not fully address:

- *Work intensification:* Increasing performance demands and reduced slack create challenges for employees who may need more processing time or work at different paces. Braverman (1974) documented long-term trends toward work intensification and deskilling that continue to shape contemporary workplaces.
- *Precarious employment:* Growth in contingent work arrangements may reduce access to accommodations and workplace protections
- *Surveillance and monitoring:* Increasing workplace surveillance may create stress and reduce opportunities for individualized work approaches
- *Standardization:* Pressure for standardized processes and behaviors may reduce tolerance for diverse approaches

These trends suggest that even within supportive organizations, broader labor market conditions create challenges. Fundamental changes to how work is organized—such as reduced working hours, more worker autonomy, or reduced performance pressure—might support neurodivergent flourishing more effectively than accommodations within existing structures. Thompson (1989) argued that understanding workplace dynamics requires attention to broader labor process characteristics, not merely individual organizational policies.

Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

Legal frameworks significantly shape neurodivergent employment. In many jurisdictions, disability discrimination laws require reasonable accommodations for disabled workers, including those with neurodevelopmental conditions. However, limitations exist:

- *Disclosure requirements:* Legal protections typically require disclosure, which carries risks
- *Reasonableness limitations:* Accommodations must be "reasonable" and not create "undue hardship," leaving significant employer discretion
- *Enforcement gaps:* Enforcement of disability discrimination laws may be inconsistent or under-resourced
- *Definitional issues:* Whether particular neurodivergent individuals meet disability definitions may be contested

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Policy reforms that might strengthen protections include:

- Broader definitions of disability encompassing neurodivergence
- Reduced emphasis on medical documentation requirements
- Proactive accessibility requirements rather than reactive accommodation models
- Stronger enforcement mechanisms
- Protection for self-identified as well as formally diagnosed individuals

Educational Systems

Educational experiences shape neurodivergent individuals' readiness for employment:

- Educational systems that support neurodivergent students may produce better-prepared job candidates
- Early identification and support can build skills and positive self-concept
- Negative educational experiences may create lasting impacts on self-efficacy and mental health

Workplace inclusion efforts operate downstream of educational systems; addressing educational disparities may be necessary for fully achieving employment equity.

Healthcare and Support Services

Access to healthcare and support services affects neurodivergent employment outcomes:

- Access to diagnosis enables formal accommodation requests, but diagnosis is often expensive and inaccessible
- Mental health services support wellbeing that enables employment
- Vocational rehabilitation services can support job placement and retention
- Fragmented service systems may create barriers to coordinated support

Income Support and Safety Nets

Income support policies affect employment decisions:

- Disability benefits may create work disincentives if employment risks benefit loss without adequate income replacement
- Universal basic income or similar policies might enable neurodivergent individuals to be more selective about employment, avoiding poor-fit positions
- Healthcare tied to employment may create job lock, particularly problematic for individuals with significant healthcare needs

Collective Action and Worker Voice

Collective action mechanisms may advance neurodivergent worker interests:

- Labor unions can negotiate for inclusive policies and enforce protections
- Worker councils and voice mechanisms can surface neurodivergent employee concerns
- Cross-organizational advocacy networks can promote industry-wide change
- Neurodivergent-led organizations can articulate priorities and influence policy

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Future Directions and Implications

The growing recognition of neurodiversity in workplace contexts presents significant opportunities for advancing both research understanding and organizational practice. This section outlines key directions for future research and practical implications for organizations and policymakers.

Research Priorities

Several research priorities emerge from the current analysis:

- *Intervention research:* Rigorous evaluation of specific organizational practices is urgently needed. Most current evidence is observational or qualitative; controlled studies examining effects of specific accommodations or interventions would substantially strengthen the evidence base. Research should examine both wellbeing and performance outcomes, and should attend to potential unintended consequences.
- *Longitudinal research:* Research tracking neurodivergent employees over extended periods would illuminate how workplace factors influence mental health trajectories, career progression, and long-term wellbeing. Understanding temporal dynamics—how needs evolve across career stages, how organizations sustain initiatives over time—would inform more effective interventions.
- *Intersectionality research:* Examining how neurodivergence intersects with gender, race, socioeconomic status, and other dimensions is essential for understanding diverse experiences and developing appropriately nuanced interventions. Current research predominantly reflects white, middle-class, male samples from Western contexts.
- *Diverse samples:* Research should include neurodivergent individuals with higher support needs, those without formal diagnosis, and those from underrepresented demographic groups. Current research disproportionately represents a narrow segment of the neurodivergent population.
- *Cross-cultural research:* Expanding research beyond North American, European, and Australian contexts would illuminate how cultural factors shape neurodivergent workplace experiences and effective practices.
- *Organizational-level research:* Research examining how organizational characteristics (size, industry, culture, structure) predict neurodivergent employee outcomes would complement individual-focused research and inform systemic interventions.
- *Stakeholder perspectives:* Research examining manager, coworker, and other stakeholder perspectives would inform more comprehensive understanding of neurodiversity dynamics in organizations.
- *Implementation research:* Understanding barriers to implementing neurodiversity practices and strategies for overcoming resistance would support translation of research into practice.
- *Technology research:* Evaluation of assistive and enabling technologies, remote work impacts, and emerging technologies including AI would address important contemporary questions.

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- *Measurement development:* Developing validated measures for neurodivergent employee wellbeing and inclusion would support more rigorous outcome assessment.
- *Participatory research:* Involving neurodivergent individuals as research partners—not merely research subjects—would enhance relevance and reflect the neurodiversity movement's emphasis on "nothing about us without us."

Implications for Organizational Practice

For human resource professionals and organizational leaders, the analysis suggests several practical implications:

- *Adopt a systemic perspective:* Rather than viewing neurodiversity support as individual accommodation requests to be processed case-by-case, organizations should examine how their environments, processes, and cultures systematically include or exclude neurodivergent employees and implement proactive changes.
- *Prioritize universal design:* Where possible, implement practices that benefit all employees (clear communication, flexibility, sensory-friendly environments) rather than creating neurodivergent-specific exceptions.
- *Invest in manager capability:* Given managers' critical role in neurodivergent employees' experiences, invest in developing managers' understanding of neurodiversity and skills in individualized, supportive management.
- *Leverage technology thoughtfully:* Provide access to assistive and enabling technologies, offer genuine choice in remote/hybrid arrangements, and audit AI systems for potential bias.
- *Attend to temporal dynamics:* Recognize that needs evolve across career stages, that late-diagnosed employees have particular needs, and that initiative sustainability requires deliberate attention.
- *Create psychological safety:* Work to create environments in which employees feel safe to disclose neurodivergent identities and request support, while honestly acknowledging that disclosure carries risks.
- *Involve neurodivergent employees:* Neurodivergent employees themselves are the experts on their experiences and needs; involve them in designing, implementing, and evaluating neurodiversity initiatives.
- *Attend to intersectionality:* Ensure that neurodiversity initiatives address the diverse experiences of neurodivergent individuals across gender, race, and other dimensions.
- *Evaluate rigorously:* Assess neurodiversity initiative effectiveness using appropriate measures, and be willing to modify approaches based on evidence.
- *Consider trade-offs:* Explicitly consider tensions and trade-offs rather than assuming neurodiversity practices are unambiguously beneficial; engage thoughtfully with complexities.

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- *Look beyond organizational boundaries:* Recognize that organizational practices operate within broader structural and policy contexts; engage in advocacy for systemic change where appropriate.

Implications for Policy

At the policy level, findings suggest opportunities for governmental and regulatory bodies:

- *Strengthen employment protections:* Strengthen and clarify legal protections for neurodivergent workers, address enforcement gaps, and reduce barriers to protection access.
- *Improve accessibility of diagnosis and support:* Reduce financial and logistical barriers to accessing diagnosis and support services.
- *Support employer initiatives:* Provide resources, guidance, and incentives for employer neurodiversity initiatives, particularly for smaller organizations with limited capacity.
- *Fund research:* Invest in rigorous research on effective workplace practices and their implementation.
- *Address systemic factors:* Consider how broader policies—regarding work hours, labor market flexibility, income support, and healthcare—affect neurodivergent employment outcomes.

Limitations

This review has several limitations that should be acknowledged:

- *Non-systematic approach:* As a narrative review, this article may have missed relevant literature or introduced selection bias in coverage.
- *Publication bias:* The literature likely over-represents positive findings regarding neurodiversity initiatives.
- *Geographic limitations:* Most cited research comes from North America, Europe, and Australia, limiting generalizability to other contexts.
- *Sample limitations in primary research:* Many cited studies involve small, non-representative samples, and disproportionately represent certain subgroups of the neurodivergent population.
- *Limited evidence for many practices:* Many recommended practices lack rigorous empirical evaluation.
- *Rapidly evolving field:* The neurodiversity field is evolving quickly; some analysis may become dated.
- *Technology evolution:* The rapid pace of technological change means that analysis of technology implications may quickly become dated.
- *Author perspective:* The review author's perspective inevitably shapes interpretation and synthesis.

These limitations suggest that recommendations should be interpreted cautiously and that continued research is essential.

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Conclusion

This article has provided a comprehensive, theoretically grounded, and critically informed examination of organizational practices supporting neurodivergent employee wellbeing. Synthesizing research across multiple disciplines while engaging with critical perspectives, the analysis reveals both significant opportunities and genuine complexities in organizational approaches to neurodiversity.

Key conclusions emerging from the analysis include:

1. First, neurodivergent individuals represent a substantial and heterogeneous population, with estimates suggesting that 15% to 20% of the population may be neurodivergent in some form. However, the boundaries of this population are contested, with important implications for how neurodiversity is understood and addressed.
2. Second, workplace challenges faced by neurodivergent employees arise substantially from environmental factors—physical environments, social demands, organizational processes, and cultural norms—though some challenges may involve individual factors not fully resolvable through environmental modification. A balanced approach addresses both environmental and individual dimensions.
3. Third, these challenges have profound impacts on neurodivergent employee wellbeing, contributing to elevated rates of mental health difficulties, burnout, negative self-concept, and career disruption. Organizations that fail to address these challenges incur human costs and lose potential contributions.
4. Fourth, evidence supports a range of organizational practices that may enhance neurodivergent employee wellbeing, though evidence quality varies substantially across practices. Continued research and rigorous evaluation are needed to strengthen the evidence base.
5. Fifth, technology and evolving work arrangements, including remote and hybrid work, present both opportunities and challenges for neurodivergent employees, requiring thoughtful organizational response rather than one-size-fits-all policies.
6. Sixth, temporal dynamics—including career stage differences, late diagnosis experiences, and initiative sustainability—require attention for effective long-term support.
7. Seventh, neurodiversity initiatives involve genuine tensions, trade-offs, and potential unintended consequences that require thoughtful navigation rather than simplistic solutions.
8. Eighth, multiple stakeholder perspectives—including managers, coworkers, and others—must be considered for effective implementation.
9. Ninth, business case arguments for neurodiversity, while strategically useful, carry risks of conditional acceptance and should be balanced with rights-based and dignity-based framings.
10. Tenth, organizational practices operate within broader structural and policy contexts that significantly shape neurodivergent employment outcomes. Comprehensive approaches address systemic factors alongside organizational interventions.

The neurodiversity movement has fundamentally challenged organizations to reconsider assumptions about cognitive normalcy and to create workplaces where diverse minds can thrive. While progress has been made, systematic transformation of workplace environments, processes, and cultures remains an ongoing project. Future research and practice should continue to develop evidence-based approaches while centering the perspectives and priorities of neurodivergent

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individuals themselves, attending to the full diversity of neurodivergent experiences, and engaging critically with the complexities inherent in organizational change.

Ultimately, creating workplaces that support neurodivergent employee wellbeing is not merely a matter of accommodation or inclusion programming; it requires fundamental reconsideration of how work is designed and organized. The goal is not simply to fit neurodivergent individuals into environments designed for others but to create environments in which neurological diversity is anticipated, valued, and supported. Achieving this goal would benefit not only neurodivergent employees but would contribute to more flexible, innovative, and humane workplaces for all—while remaining attentive to the tensions and trade-offs this transformation entails.

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