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WP4 - COHESION Training Package for Students with Neurological Disorders

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Contents

Table of Contents 2
CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES: WHAT MAKES A SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE JOB ENVIRONMENT 5
Introduction 5
1.1 Rethinking the “Normal” Workplace 5
1.2 Practical Adaptations: Making Inclusion Real 6
1.3 Universal Design: Inclusion by Design 7
1.4 Tools That Support Inclusion 9
1.5 Tips for Inclusive Implementation 9
Conclusions 10
References 10
CHAPTER 2: FINDING THE RIGHT FIT: MATCHING YOUR STRENGTHS TO THE RIGHT ROLE 12
Introduction 12
2.1 Why “Fit” Matters — For You as a Student 12
2.2 Customizing Job Roles: Practical Strategies for Students 13
2.3 Personalized Support 14
2.4 Feedback Loops: Refining the Fit Over Time 14
Conclusions 16
References 17
CHAPTER 3: RECOGNIZING BARRIERS AT WORK 18
Introduction 18
3.1 Rigid Structures 18
3.2 Unclear Communication 19
3.3 Barriers due to unclear communication 20
3.4 Impact of barriers to neurodivergent students 21
3.5 Overstimulating Environments 23
3.6 Cognitive and emotional barriers due to overstimulating environments 23
3.7 Impact of overstimulation environments on neurodivergent students 25
3.8 Tips on how to make office setups sensory friendly for neurodivergent students 25
3.9 Exclusion of neurodivergent students 28
3.10 Tips for recognizing problematic environments 29

3.11 What neurodivergent students need in the workplace to thrive? 29
Conclusions 31
References 31
CHAPTER 4: WHEN EMPLOYERS DON'T UNDERSTAND: DEALING WITH INFLEXIBLE WORKPLACES 34
Introduction 34
4.1 Lack of awareness or accommodations from employers 35
4.2 How rigid systems fail neurodivergent employees 39
4.3 Strategies for adaptation and advocating for adjustments 42
Conclusions 46
References 47
CHAPTER 5: WHAT GOOD EMPLOYERS DO – INCLUSIVE HR PRACTICES EXPLAINED .. 49
Introduction 49
5.1 Inclusive Recruitment and Hiring Practices 49
5.2 Orientation and Everyday Practices 50
5.3 Accessible Instructions and Supportive Tools 50
5.4 Technology That Supports Your Work 51
5.5 Everyday Signs of Inclusive HR 51
5.6 Summary: What to Expect from Inclusive HR 52
Conclusions 53
References 53
CHAPTER 6: BUILDING SOFT SKILLS FOR DIVERSE WORKPLACES 54
Introduction 54
6.1 Emotional Regulation and Self-Confidence 54
6.2 Communication Skills 55
6.3 Teamwork and Collaboration 56
6.4 Practicing Flexibility and Resilience 56
6.5 Practical Exercises for Soft Skills 57
Conclusions 57
References 58
CHAPTER 7: INTERNSHIPS AND FIRST JOBS – WHAT YOU CAN LEARN AND EXPECT ... 59
Introduction 59
7.1 Bridge the Gap: How Internships and Mentoring Connect Education to Employment 59
7.2 Build Confidence: The Value of Real-World Exposure 60
7.3 Designing effective inclusive Internships that work 61
7.4 Essential elements for effective mentorship 61

7.5 Benefits of mentorship for neurodivergent students 62
7.6 Feedback 63
7.7 Benefits of feedback to neurodivergent students 64
7.8 Learning Space: Shifting the Purpose of Internships 64
7.9 Tips: Practical Suggestions for Inclusive Internships 65
Conclusions 67
References 67
CHAPTER 8: WORKPLACE CULTURE – HOW TO KNOW IF A JOB IS RIGHT FOR YOU 70
Introduction 70
8.1 How Values, Communication, and Behavior Shape a Workplace 71
8.2 Signs of Inclusive vs. Exclusive Culture 75
8.3 How to Find Supportive Environments 78
Conclusions 81
References 82
CHAPTER 9: ADVOCATING FOR YOURSELF AT WORK 84
Introduction 84
9.1 Deciding Whether, When, and How to Disclose a Diagnosis 84
9.2 Asking for Accommodations 85
9.3 Understanding Your Rights and Legal Protections 86
9.4 Expressing Boundaries and Needs 87
9.5 Building Confidence in Self-Advocacy 88
9.6 Practical Tips and Scripts for Everyday Advocacy 88
Conclusions 89
References 89
CHAPTER 10: REAL-LIFE SUCCESS STORIES – HOW NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS HAVE THRIVED 91
Introduction 91
10.1 Strengths that workplaces value 91
10.2 Examples of success in different fields 92
10.3 What can be learned from these stories? 94
Conclusions 95
References 95

CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING INCLUSIVE WORKPLACES: WHAT MAKES A SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE JOB ENVIRONMENT

Introduction

Imagine walking into a workspace where the lights are too bright, the noise is overwhelming, and the expectations are unclear. For many students, especially those with cognitive differences, mental health challenges, or sensory sensitivities, this is not just uncomfortable; it's disabling.

Inclusive work environments are designed to prevent this. They recognize that people experience the world differently and that these differences are not deficits, but part of human diversity. This chapter introduces how inclusive organizational design, human resource (HR) practices, and flexible work routines can create spaces where everyone, including vulnerable university students, can participate, contribute, and thrive.

1.1 Rethinking the "Normal" Workplace

Most workplaces are built around a narrow idea of what a "productive" worker looks like: someone who can sit still for hours, multitask under pressure, and socialize easily. But what if you process information differently? What if you need quiet to focus, or time to recover from social interaction?

Inclusive design starts by questioning these norms. It asks:

- What assumptions are we making about how people work?
- Who is being left out by these assumptions?
- How can we redesign our systems to include more people?

This shift in mindset is the foundation of inclusive environments. It's not about making special accommodations for a few; it's about designing for diversity from the start (Booth & Ainscow, 2011).

1.2 Practical Adaptations: Making Inclusion Real

Inclusion becomes real when it's built into everyday practices. The table below outlines practical strategies that can be applied in university settings, internships, or collaborative projects. These adaptations are designed to reduce stress, increase clarity, and make participation easier for students with diverse cognitive and emotional needs:

Table 1. Inclusive Practices for Everyday Work Situations. Own elaboration.

Work Area	**Inclusive Practice**
Working Routines	Allow flexible start times; provide written instructions; avoid last-minute changes.
Task Assignments	Match tasks to strengths; offer choices; break down complex tasks into steps.
Scheduling	Offer part-time or staggered hours; allow breaks; avoid back-to-back meetings.
Communication	Use plain language; provide visual aids; confirm understanding.
Feedback	Give regular, supportive feedback; focus on growth; avoid public criticism.
Working Routines	Allow flexible start times; provide written instructions; avoid last-minute changes.

These practices are not just helpful for students with disabilities; they benefit everyone. Clear instructions, flexible hours, and supportive feedback improve performance and reduce stress across the board (CAST, 2018).

1.3 Universal Design: Inclusion by Design

Universal Design (UD) is a powerful concept that originated in architecture, where it was used to create buildings and spaces accessible to people of all abilities, without the need for retrofitting or special accommodations. Over time, this approach has been adapted to education, digital environments, and increasingly, to workplace design. The core idea is simple but transformative: design environments and systems that are usable by everyone, to the greatest extent possible, from the beginning (Story et al., 1998).

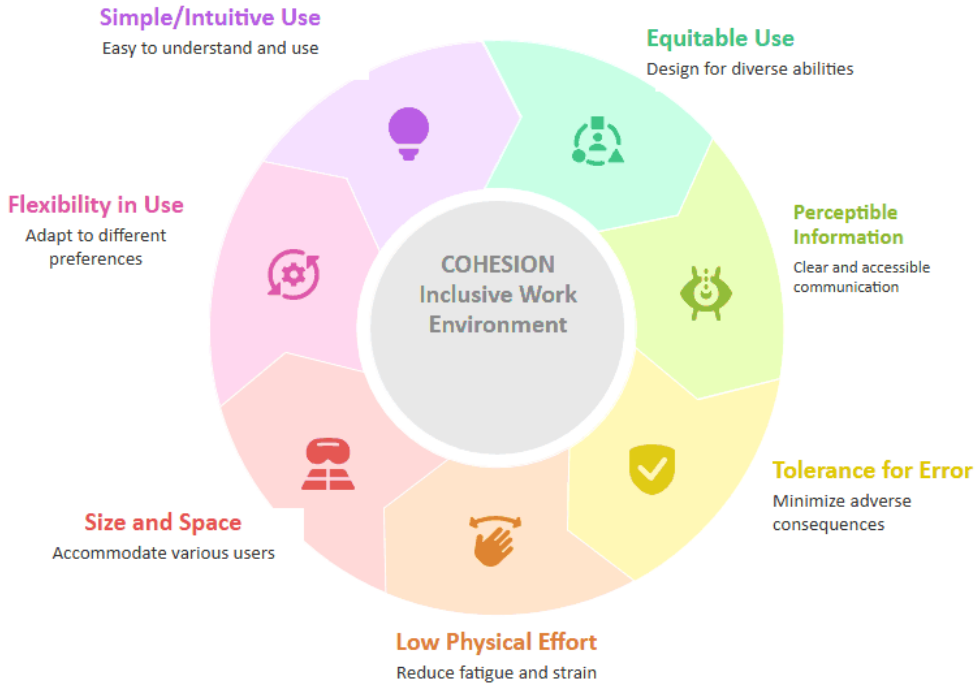
In the context of inclusive work environments, especially those involving university students, UD offers a proactive framework for removing barriers before they arise. Rather than waiting for someone to request an accommodation, UD encourages organizations to build flexibility and accessibility into their systems by default.

Here are **three (3) foundational UD principles** and how they apply to work and learning environments:

- Equitable Use: All individuals, regardless of ability, can access the same tools, spaces, and opportunities. For example, using digital platforms that are screen-reader compatible ensures that visually impaired students can participate equally.
- Flexibility in Use: People can choose how they engage with tasks. This might mean offering both written and video instructions or allowing students to submit work in different formats (e.g., audio, text, or visual).
- Simple and Intuitive Design: Systems and instructions are easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, language skills, or cognitive profile. This reduces anxiety and cognitive overload, especially for students with ADHD or learning differences.

Example: A shared calendar app that uses color coding, reminders, and visual icons supports students with ADHD by making deadlines more visible and manageable, but it also helps everyone stay organized and reduces missed appointments.

Figure 1. Universal Design in the Workplace. Own elaboration.



As illustrated in Figure 1, the Universal Design (UD) framework can be visualized as a circle divided into seven equal segments, each representing one of the core UD principles. At the center of the circle is the phrase “Inclusive Work Environment”, symbolizing that inclusion is not an afterthought but the foundation of effective and equitable design. Each segment of the circle reflects a principle that contributes to making workspaces more accessible, intuitive, and supportive for all individuals, especially those with cognitive, emotional, or sensory vulnerabilities.

Inclusive design is systemic; each principle supports the others, and together they create environments where all students can participate fully and confidently. As Burgstahler (2015) emphasizes, Universal Design is not just about accessibility; it’s about usability, dignity, and equity for all.

By applying UD principles, universities and employers can create environments that are not only more inclusive but also more efficient, engaging, and supportive for everyone. Research shows that environments designed with UD in mind lead to

higher satisfaction, better performance, and reduced stress among diverse users (Burgstahler, 2015; Story et al., 1998).

1.4 Tools That Support Inclusion

Technology can be a powerful ally in creating inclusive environments. Here are some tools that can support students with different needs:

- Speech-to-text software (e.g., Otter.ai, Microsoft Dictate) for students with dyslexia or processing difficulties.
- Noise-canceling headphones or quiet rooms for those with sensory sensitivities.
- Task management apps (e.g., Trello, Todoist) with visual timelines for students with ADHD.
- Screen readers and captioning tools for students with visual or hearing impairments.

These tools are not just assistive; they are empowering. They give students control over how they work and communicate, which builds confidence and independence (Lindsay et al., 2018; Schur et al., 2014).

1.5 Tips for Inclusive Implementation

Creating an inclusive environment doesn't require a big budget or complex policies. It starts with awareness and intention. Here are some tips for students:

- As a student, it's helpful to ask others what works best for them, rather than assuming.
- Stay flexible: If something isn't working for you or your peers, be open to trying a different approach.
- Support open conversations: Help create spaces where it's safe to talk about challenges without fear of judgment.

- Value diversity: Recognize that different ways of thinking, learning, and working enrich your experience and those around you.

"Flexibility is not a concession—it is a strategy for excellence" (Katz & Sugden, 2020).

Conclusions

Designing inclusive environments is only the first step. To truly support vulnerable university students in the workplace, we must go beyond the environment and look closely at the individuals within it. Inclusion is not just about access; it is about belonging and contribution. The next chapter explores how aligning job roles with each person's unique strengths, preferences, and neurocognitive profiles can unlock potential, enhance well-being, and foster meaningful participation. By understanding the concept of "fit," we move from designing for inclusion to living it in practice.

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CHAPTER 2: FINDING THE RIGHT FIT: MATCHING YOUR STRENGTHS TO THE RIGHT ROLE

Introduction

Inclusion begins with access, but it flourishes through personalization. Once students are welcomed into a work environment, the next challenge is ensuring that their roles fit who they are. For vulnerable university students, those navigating neurodivergence, mental health challenges, or learning differences, this fit can make the difference between surviving and thriving.

This chapter explores how job roles can be customized to align with individual strengths, comfort zones, and neurocognitive profiles. It introduces the concept of "fit" not as a luxury, but as a strategy for well-being, performance, and long-term engagement.

2.1 Why "Fit" Matters — For You as a Student

"Fit" means how well your strengths, interests, and working style match the tasks you're given. When your role aligns with what you're good at, you'll likely feel more confident, motivated, and capable. But when there's a mismatch, it can lead to stress, frustration, or even burnout.

Think about this: If you're someone who's great at visualizing spaces or organizing things, you might thrive in roles like inventory management or creating visual guides. On the other hand, fast-paced verbal tasks might feel overwhelming. Choosing tasks that play to your strengths helps you shine.

Studies show that finding the right fit between a person and their role is closely linked to job satisfaction and mental well-being—especially for young people starting out in the workplace (Kristof-Brown *et al.*, 2005; Swider *et al.*, 2015).

2.2 Customizing Job Roles: Practical Strategies for Students

When you're involved in university-based work experiences or internships, it's important that your role fits your strengths and needs. The table below offers practical ways to make your job tasks more comfortable, motivating, and inclusive.

Table 2. Strategies for Customizing Job Roles to Support Individual Strengths. Own elaboration.

Customization Area	Strategy
Task Matching	Choose tasks that match what you're naturally good at or enjoy. If you're detail-oriented, you might enjoy data entry or proofreading. If you're creative, you could thrive in content creation or design. Doing what suits you helps you stay motivated and reduces stress.
Pacing and Timing	Ask for flexible deadlines or break big tasks into smaller steps. This can help if you find it hard to stay organized or feel overwhelmed—especially if you experience anxiety or have ADHD. Clear milestones make progress easier to track.
Work Environment	Explore options like quiet spaces, natural lighting, or remote work. If you're sensitive to noise or social situations, a calm setting can help you focus and feel more comfortable.
Communication Style	Request clear instructions, written summaries, or visual aids. This is especially helpful if you process information differently or if you're working in a second language. Avoiding jargon makes things easier to understand.
Support Structures	Regular check-ins, a mentor, or a peer buddy can make a big difference. Having someone to ask questions or talk

	to helps you feel supported, especially when you're learning something new.

These strategies aren't just special accommodations; they're inclusive design practices that help everyone learn and thrive. As a student, you'll especially benefit from environments where roles and tasks are adapted to different needs. This kind of flexibility makes work more respectful, empowering, and supportive for all, especially if you've ever felt out of place in traditional settings.

2.3 Personalized Support

Support isn't one-size-fits-all. As a student, you might benefit from things like one-on-one coaching, regular feedback, or just knowing that your feelings are understood. Having a supervisor or mentor who listens and creates a safe space can make it easier to speak up when something's not working and ask for the adjustments you need.

For example, if you experience anxiety, you might feel nervous before giving a presentation. A mentor who offers practice sessions and encourages you with positive feedback can help you feel more confident and less stressed.

Research shows that having supportive supervisors improves performance and helps people, especially those who are neurodivergent, stay in their roles longer and feel better at work (Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016).

2.4 Feedback Loops: Refining the Fit Over Time

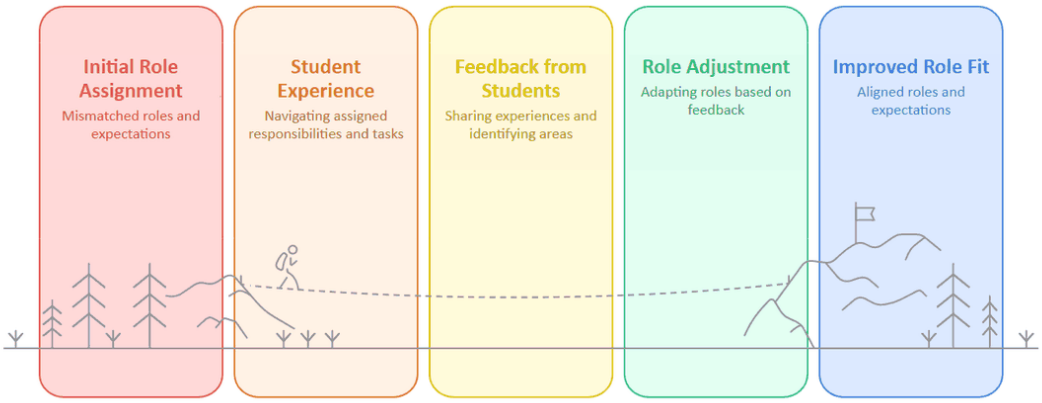
Your role in a workplace or learning environment isn't fixed; it can evolve as your needs and strengths develop. That's why it's important to create feedback loops with your supervisor, mentor, or team leader. These help ensure that your responsibilities and support systems stay aligned with your goals. Effective feedback loops should be:

- Regular: Try to schedule weekly check-ins to reflect on progress and challenges.

- Two-way: Share openly what's working for you and what isn't and be open to suggestions.
- Constructive: Focus on growth and learning, not blame or criticism.

By actively participating in these conversations, you'll help shape a role that fits you better over time.

Figure 2. The Role Fit Journey. Own elaboration



As you settle into a new role, it's normal if things don't feel like a perfect match right away. Figure 2 shows how your experience can evolve over time to create a better fit between you and your tasks. It starts with your initial assignment—some tasks might feel unfamiliar or not quite aligned with your strengths. But as you get involved and learn what works (and what doesn't), you'll start to understand your preferences and needs more clearly.

This is where feedback becomes essential. Regular conversations with your supervisor or mentor give you a chance to share what's helping you succeed and what's holding you back. Based on this dialogue, your role can be adjusted, maybe tasks are reshuffled, deadlines are adapted, or extra support is added. These changes aren't about fixing problems; they're about helping you grow and feel more confident in what you do.

You're not expected to figure everything out alone. A supportive workplace will check in with you, listen to your feedback, and make thoughtful changes that help you thrive. This process isn't rigid; it's flexible, responsive, and built around you.

Here are some practical ways to make sure your role fits you well as you go:

- **Start with your strengths**: Talk about what you enjoy and where you feel confident. This helps others assign tasks that energize you instead of overwhelming you.
- **Notice what's not working**: If you feel stressed, confused, or disengaged, speak up. It might mean the task isn't a good match—not that you're doing something wrong.
- **Adjustments are normal**: Changing a task, shifting a deadline, or trying a new approach isn't failure—it's part of learning.
- **Celebrate progress**: Focus on effort and growth, not just perfect results. Every step forward builds your confidence and resilience.

"*When we design roles around people, rather than forcing people into roles, we create workplaces that are humane, productive, and inclusive*." — Austin & Pisano (2017)

This mindset turns your workplace into a learning space, where you're not just included, but empowered to succeed.

Conclusions

Understanding and supporting individual fit is a vital step in building inclusive work environments where you can feel seen, valued, and empowered. But even the best intentions can fall short if the broader workplace structure remains rigid, overstimulating, or unclear. The next chapter explores how environmental and organizational barriers, such as poor communication, sensory overload, and silence around neurodiversity, can unintentionally exclude students with autism, ADHD, or

trauma histories. To move from integration to true inclusion, we must first recognize when the workplace itself becomes the challenge.

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CHAPTER 3: RECOGNIZING BARRIERS AT WORK

Introduction

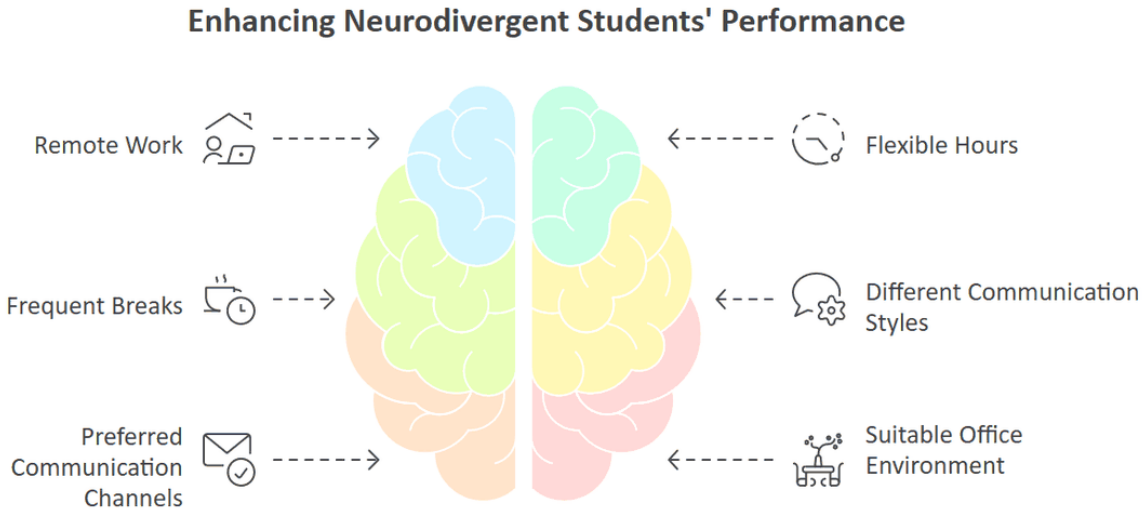
Workplaces often pride themselves on diversity and inclusion, yet for many neurodivergent students—including those with autism, ADHD, or trauma histories—the everyday work environment itself can present profound challenges. The barriers they face are not due to personal deficits, but rather to organizational structures that fail to accommodate different ways of thinking, processing, and interacting.

3.1 Rigid Structures

In an organisation with rigid work culture, they assume that all persons are the same. Therefore, rigid structures prioritize uniformity over adaptability and ignore individuality. They believe that all people can communicate in the same way (normal communication), know the unspoken rules, can process information in the same way, can work the same way and can be evaluated in the same way. However, this is not the case for neurodivergent persons.

Neurodivergent individuals (students) can struggle in rigid work cultures. Organisations usually have no inclusive office setup, strict work schedules and breaks, and fixed policies on communication style, communication channel. Each organisation also has different and complex work procedures and also some unread rules. All the above put extra stress on neurodivergent students and leave them feeling undervalued and uninspired.

These are very challenging for neurodivergent students who may thrive and have maximum performance with alternative arrangements like remote work or flexible hours, many breaks, use of different communication styles, prefer different communication channels, office environment that suits their needs.



3.2 Unclear Communication

Neurodivergent students and neurotypical individuals can have differing communication styles. A neurotypical individual may use indirect language, filled with coded non-verbal cues, while neurodivergent people use direct language (Clouder et al., 2020).

The differences in the way neurotypical and neurodivergent individuals communicate creates barriers for neurodivergent individuals in getting the information they need in order to be able to work in an office environment. The challenge of getting key information and/or having to adjust for and interpret neurotypical communications can lead to exhaustion and no motivation.

This can also create confusion and anxiety for neurodivergent employees. This is especially true for individuals in the ASD spectrum or individuals with ADHD, who may have specific communication preferences or processing styles.

Individuals with ADHD cannot maintain concentration. Therefore, they may prefer written communication over verbal instructions and may want all verbal

communication to be given in written form. They would also like to receive clear and specific instructions during communication.

Individuals in the autism spectrum find it difficult to know, recognise or understand societal ‘rules’ to social interaction, and this makes social interaction difficult. They may also miss certain conversational cues and may struggle with understanding complex or indirect language. Therefore, they need to communicate directly, without metaphors or nuances, to receive concise written instructions and information clearly highlighting any actions the individual needs to complete.

3.3 Barriers due to unclear communication

Unclear communication like ambiguous language, poorly defined expectations, and lack of clarity in communication creates barriers to neurodivergent students listed below:

Anxiety and Overthinking: When neurodivergent students are given unclear instructions or vague expectations, they may become extremely anxious and overthink things as they attempt to figure out what the requirements are or what the unsaid meaning is.

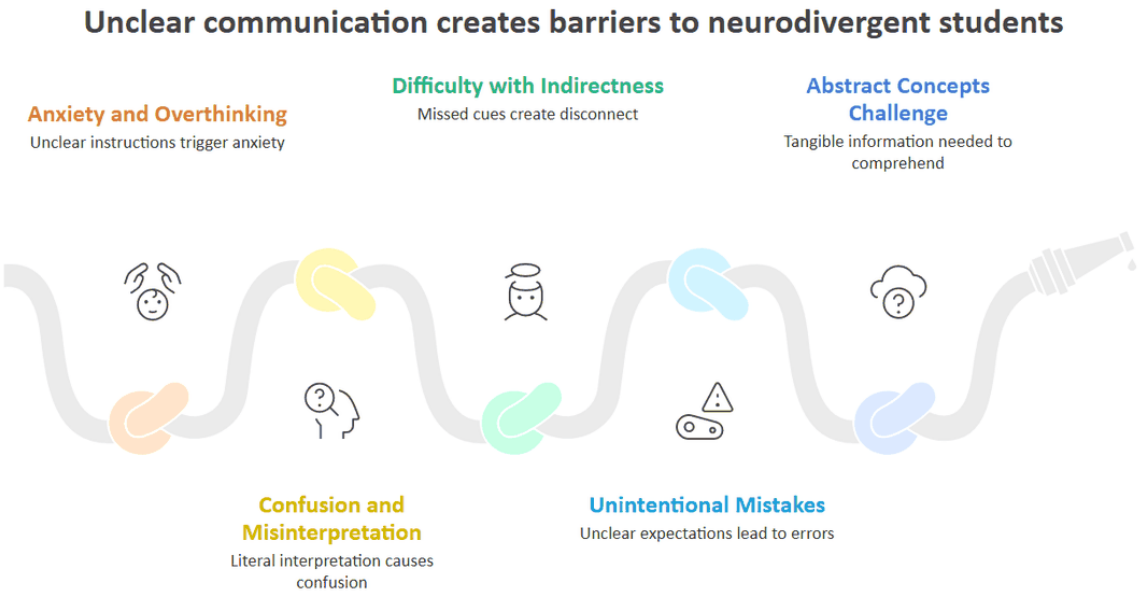
Confusion and Misinterpretation: Neurodivergent students, particularly those with autism, may take language literally, which can cause them to get confused or anxious when they encounter ambiguity, jargon, or suggested meanings that are not made clear.

Trouble understanding indirect communication can cause many neurodivergent students to feel "out of sync" since it depends on non-verbal clues and subtext, which can be challenging to decipher.

Unintentional Mistakes: When expectations or instructions are unclear, neurodivergent students may make mistakes because they were never given clear

instructions on what was expected of them, not because they lack the necessary skills.

Challenges with Abstract Concepts: For neurodivergent students who require more tangible and factual information to comprehend, communication that depends on metaphors, abstract thought, or sophisticated humour can be a major obstacle.



3.4 Impact of barriers to neurodivergent students

The impact of above barriers to neurodivergent students are:

Social Isolation and Disconnection: Neurodivergent students may isolate themselves due to mistakes they made, or misunderstandings. This will lead to decrease in their productivity and poor mental health.

Disengagement and Withdrawal:

Neurodivergent students may be overwhelmed by unclear communication and may feel being unheard and unsupported. This can lead to withdrawal and a decrease in engagement.

Therefore, one's *messages should be clear, concise and consisten*t. Be clear by using plain and direct language. It would be a good idea to be concise by using simple and short phrases and avoid unnecessary information. Also it is good to be consistent, repetition can be a good thing with a neurodivergent audience. In the case you are giving instructions, clear instructions must be given (what the task is, how to complete it, when it needs to be completed by, who to approach if there are questions). It is helpful to give verbal instructions in written form and avoid idioms, sarcasm, metaphors or vague instructions unless you are sure that these are understood.

Additionally, it is helpful to use simple and logical structure in order to keep the neurodivergent audience focused and engaged. Lots of text and long paragraphs should be avoided. Can include a summary, short paragraphs, bullet points, and also simple instructions.

In the case of meetings, it is better to organise meetings in small groups. Also it is a good practice to hand out written agendas before meetings and minutes after.

Source:Autistic people experience the world in a different way.Tuning your communication will make a big difference :LaTrobe - AS in workplace - Communication v6, La Trobe university 2020

3.5 Overstimulating Environments

Neurodivergent students may experience differences in sensory processing (Clouder et al., 2020; Cobbaert & Rose, 2023; Jameson, 2021; Kuiper et al., 2019; Robertson, 2010b; Sarrett, 2018; Savickaite, 2023; Tomczak, 2022). Some of the sensory systems that can be challenged by surrounding environments are:

- Visual or sight (bright fluorescent lighting, lack of natural lighting)
- Auditory or hearing (loud noises or environments, such as concerts)
- Gustatory (unable to eat certain food textures or flavours, as well as digestion sensitivities)
- Olfactory or smell (strong smells such as perfumes)
- Tactile or touch (certain types of clothing or textures)
- Proprioception or position of body (confusing layouts, crowded visual field, or rapid motion)
- Vestibular or movement of body (balance)

Sensory overload can lead to emotional, cognitive, social and communication barriers.

3.6 Cognitive and emotional barriers due to overstimulating environments

Increased stress and anxiety: When a neurodivergent student is exposed to stressful situations this can increase stress and anxiety, which can affect mental health and general wellbeing.

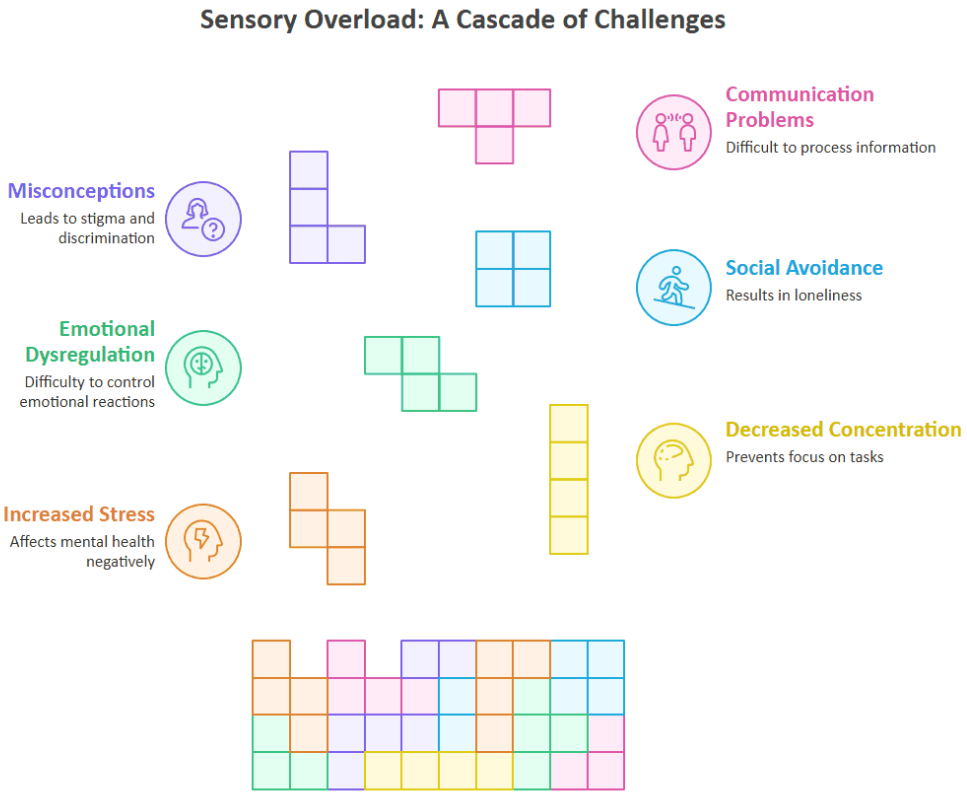
Decreased Concentration: Bright lights or loud noises can prevent a neurodivergent student from focusing on his work task.

Emotional dysregulation: Neurodivergent students may find it more difficult to control their emotional reactions to stressful events as a result of sensory overload, which can enlarge feelings like sadness, worry, or irritation.

Social avoidance and isolation: People may leave busy areas or social gathering in order to escape excessive sensory input, which can result in loneliness and lost chances for involvement and integration.

Misconceptions: People who are not neurodivergent might not comprehend sensory overload, which could result in incorrect perceptions of neurodivergent behaviour and possible discrimination or stigma.

Communication problems: People who are neurodivergent may find it difficult to process spoken information in noisy or chaotic settings, which makes it difficult to engage in meetings or conversations



3.7 Impact of overstimulation environments on neurodivergent students

All the above barriers have the following impact on neurodivergent students:

Reduced productivity and burnout: The continuous attempt to manage sensory overload over an extended period of time can wear one out mentally and physically, which affects wellbeing and productivity.

Meltdowns and shutdowns: Severe sensory overload can cause withdrawal or a meltdown (strong emotional reaction), which makes it difficult to communicate and work.

Reduced job satisfaction and increased turnover: Feeling unheard, unsupported, and undervalued can lead to decreased job satisfaction and even employee departures.

3.8 Tips on how to make office setups sensory friendly for neurodivergent students

Traditional office setups can be overwhelming for individuals with sensory sensitivities, which are common in ADHD and autism.

Individuals with ADHD: Individuals with ADHD have difficulty in focusing and maintaining attention. These persons are easily distracted and cannot work in noisy environments.

Therefore, it would be beneficial for neurodivergent students with ADHD:

- to have a workspace away from distractions like corridors or public spaces
- to use noise cancelling headphones
- to be able to work from home more frequently
- to indicate in their online calendars some time as **f**ocus time to reduce the chance of being distracted during that period of time.

- to be able to stim. Stimming helps persons with ADHD to concentrate, so allowing fidget devices can also be helpful.

Individuals in the ASD spectrum: Individuals in the ASD spectrum have sensory sensitivities like sensitivity to specific textures, lighting, tastes, sounds, temperatures or smells. Some sensory experiences can be comforting, while others can cause chronic stress, reduced productivity. As a result, neurodivergent students may feel physically unwelcomed or unable to function in the space and can lead to chronic stress, reduced productivity and a decline in mental health. Individuals in the ASD spectrum have the ability of masking (hiding) their autistic traits.

Therefore, it would be helpful for neurodivergent students in the ASD spectrum:

- to work in a quiet space away from other colleagues or public areas
- be given noise cancelling headphones/earplugs
- to avoid very brightly lit workspaces (fluorescent lighting), fragrance free workspaces
- to use screen filters or desk dividers
- to use visual supports, such as signs and wayfinding aids with pictures, pictograms, colours, or small sentences in order to be able to navigate the space independently and easily.
- to use fidget toys to help them reduce sensory overload

Individuals with Dyslexia:

Individuals with dyslexia have difficulty in focusing and are easily distracted in certain environments and are vulnerable to overstimulation.

Therefore, it would be helpful for neurodivergent students with Dyslexia to:

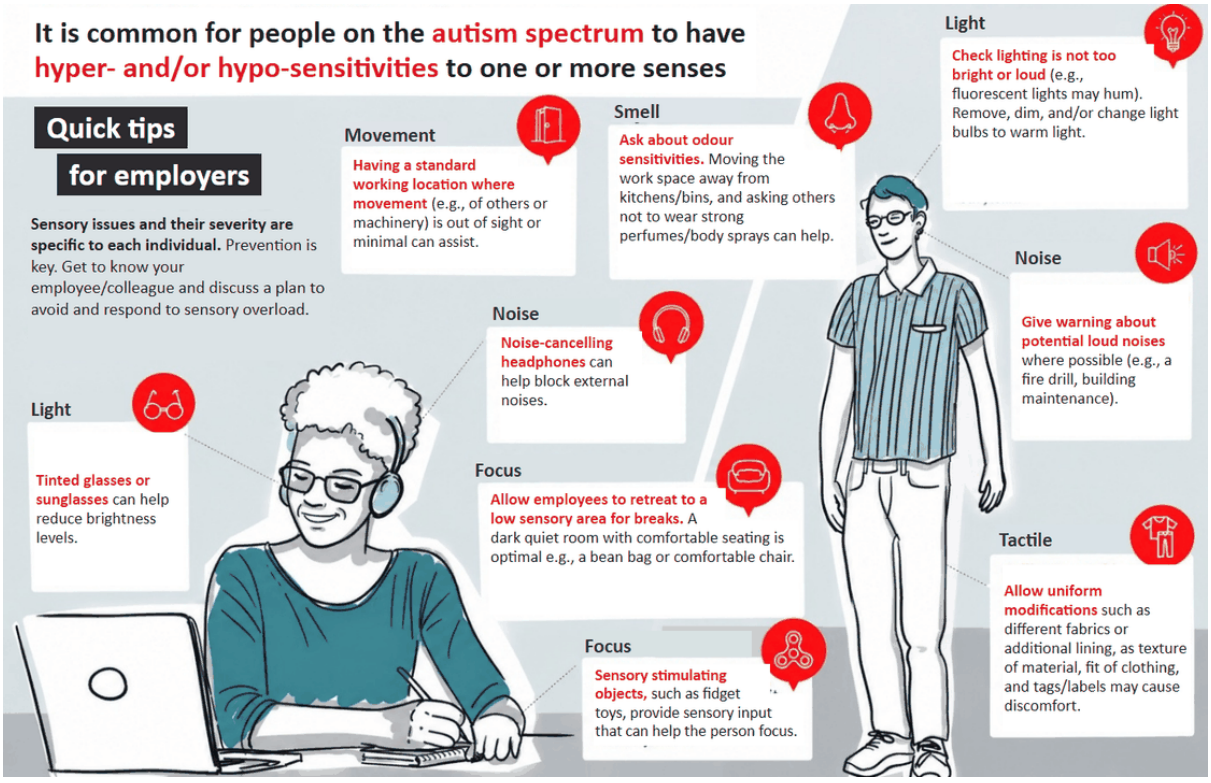
- work in areas with minimal distractions like in a quiet space or at home
- to use noise-cancelling headphones to aid focus and prevent sensory or information overload.

Individuals with dyspraxia

“Dyspraxia is a common disorder that affects movement and co-ordination.” People who suffer from dyspraxia have trouble coordinating their motions. This implies that it may take a lot more effort to do certain activities. These people may move clumsily, have poor balance, and frequently trip or bump into objects.

Therefore, it would be helpful for neurodivergent students with dyspraxia to work in a workplace where there is not much furniture or other items that may increase the risk of injuring them in case of a trip.

By accommodating the sensory needs of neurodivergent students an employer can create a more inclusive and supportive environment that will enhance the well-being and participation of all users.



Source: It is common for people on the autism spectrum to have hyper- and/or hypo-sensitivities to one or more senses,Olga Tennison Autism Research Centre and La Trobe University, 2020,

https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5a88ab00f43b552a84c3b7c9/t/6009cb4b0f64ae1c5a755f54/1611254626756/Autism+%26+the+workplace+-+Sensory+sensitivities.pdf

3.9 Exclusion of neurodivergent students

When an organisation thinks about inclusion, the emphasis frequently shifts to visible aspects: recruiting a diverse workforce, implementing anti-discrimination laws, and ensuring accessibility through features like ramps or ergonomic office equipment. However, what about the hidden challenges?

For neurodivergent individuals (neurodivergent students), including those with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, and other cognitive variations, the invisible hurdles often pose the greatest difficulties. These challenges originate from established practices, unwritten norms, and unexamined systems that cater primarily to a neurotypical population, neglecting the wide spectrum of cognitive diversity.

This phenomenon is referred to as dis-inclusion. In contrast to overt exclusion, which actively prevents participation, dis-inclusion silently flourishes in spaces geared toward a neurotypical majority. It manifests in overly stimulating office layouts, inflexible policies, and the presumption that everyone conforms to the same standard. Dis-inclusion fosters settings that obstruct rather than help.

It is very important to build a culture within the organisation that can foster inclusion. In order for an organisation to do so, it must:

- educate teams on neurodiversity: Offer training to help employees and managers understand neurodivergence and foster empathy.
- encourage diverse communication styles: Provide options for participation beyond speaking in meetings, such as written feedback or asynchronous brainstorming.
- foster psychological safety: Build a culture where employees feel comfortable sharing their needs without fear of stigma or judgment.
- become a neurodivergent ally: Allyship involves recognising and using your own privilege to support and uplift those who are marginalised or do not have the same privileges. By being an ally to your neurodivergent colleagues, you can help foster

an inclusive culture where everyone can be themselves and thrive at work. (Understanding neurodivergent at work,understanding-neurodivergence-at-work-toolkit.pdf).

You can be an ally by:

- Recognising the obstacles that neurodivergent individuals face at work
- Remember that allyship is a process. You have to listen to them and learn from them and manage to build strong and positive relationships with them.
- Do your own research and try passing your knowledge to others.
- Treat neurodivergent colleagues like adults – although they may face barriers, they bring unique strengths to the workplace and are as capable and valuable as other employees.
- Value neurodivergent individuals' contributions. Recognise the unique skills that neurodivergent individuals bring. Their different ways of thinking can drive innovation.

3.10 Tips for recognizing problematic environments

How can a neurodivergent student recognise a problematic environment?

Environments with:

- rigid structure
- unclear communication
- sensory overload
- dis-inclusion

are problematic environments.

3.11 What neurodivergent students need in the workplace to thrive?

Non-Rigid structure

•Remote work

• Flexible hours

• Frequent breaks

•Use of different communication style

•Use preferred communication channel

• Office environment that suits their need

Clear communication

- Clear, concise and consistent messages
- Verbal instructions in written form
- Use simple and logical structure
- Meetings in small groups
- Written agendas before meetings and minutes after.

Non-Overstimulating Environment

- Work in a quiet space away from other colleagues or public areas
- Give noise cancelling headphones/earplugs
- Avoid very brightly lit workspaces (fluorescent lighting)
- Fragrance free workspaces
- Provide screen filters or introduce desk dividers
- Implement visual supports, such as signs and wayfinding aids with pictures, pictograms, colours, or small sentences

Neuro-inclusive culture

- Educate Teams on Neurodiversity

- Encourage Diverse Communication Styles
- Foster Psychological Safety
- Become a neurodivergent ally
- Value neurodivergent individuals' contributions

Conclusions

This chapter shows that many workplaces are not built for neurodivergent students, and the problem is not the students but the environment. Rigid rules, unclear communication, and loud or overwhelming office spaces make work harder and can lead to stress, anxiety, withdrawal, and low motivation.

These barriers are often invisible, which means neurodivergent people can feel excluded without anyone realising it. However, small adjustments—like flexible schedules, clear instructions, quiet spaces, and respectful communication—can make a big difference.

If workplaces understand neurodiversity and create a supportive culture, neurodivergent students can perform well, feel valued, and thrive.

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CHAPTER 4: WHEN EMPLOYERS DON'T UNDERSTAND: DEALING WITH INFLEXIBLE WORKPLACES

Introduction

The transition from higher education to employment is a critical stage for all students, but it presents unique challenges for those with disabilities such as autism or epilepsy. While policies often emphasize equality, the reality of many workplaces reveals persistent gaps in awareness and support. Employers who lack understanding of neurodivergence frequently fail to provide the reasonable accommodations that would allow these graduates to thrive. Rigid systems, built on standardized schedules, communication styles, and performance metrics, further marginalize individuals whose strengths may not align with conventional norms. Yet, despite these barriers, many students and employees develop coping strategies and engage in self-advocacy to secure fair treatment. This essay explores the lack of awareness among employers, the rigidity of workplace systems, and the strategies neurodivergent employees use to navigate these challenges. This chapter examines and analyzes the following key aspects that define an inclusive work environment and offers practical strategies for identifying and securing such opportunities:

- Limited employer awareness and insufficient accommodations often make it difficult for students and young workers with autism or epilepsy to enter and succeed in the workplace.
- Rigid workplace systems and inflexible policies create barriers for neurodivergent individuals, limiting opportunities for early career development.
- Young workers may face misunderstanding, exclusion, or unfair evaluation when organizational structures do not account for diverse cognitive or medical needs.

- Assessing workplace culture and policies before employment helps students and recent graduates identify environments that match their professional and personal needs.
- Developing coping strategies and self-advocacy skills allows young neurodivergent employees to navigate challenges and secure reasonable adjustments effectively.
- Supportive and inclusive workplaces empower students and early-career workers to thrive, leveraging their unique strengths while building professional experience and confidence.

4.1 Lack of awareness or accommodations from employers

The transition from university to the workplace is often described as a challenging yet rewarding phase in the life of young professionals. For students with disabilities, particularly those with autism spectrum conditions or epilepsy, this transition can be even more complex. One of the most persistent barriers they face is not the inherent difficulty of their conditions, but rather the lack of awareness and accommodations on the part of employers. This absence of understanding creates environments that are not only unwelcoming but also actively exclusionary, forcing talented individuals into positions where they are undervalued and under-supported. Employers often operate under the assumption that equality means treating every worker in exactly the same way. At first glance, this philosophy might appear fair. Yet, what it fails to account for is the profound difference between equality and equity. Equality suggests uniform treatment, while equity requires the adjustment of conditions to create genuinely fair opportunities. For an autistic graduate entering a busy office with fluorescent lighting and constant background noise, equality would mean being expected to endure the same setting as everyone else. Equity, however, would mean recognizing the sensory overload this environment can cause and making reasonable changes, such as providing quieter workspaces, noise-cancelling tools, or more

predictable scheduling. Without these adaptations, the promise of equal opportunity is hollow.

The lack of awareness among employers is rarely the result of outright prejudice. More often, it stems from a culture of ignorance reinforced by organizational inertia. Managers and human resources departments may have little or no training in disability inclusion. For instance, surveys conducted in several European countries show that while most employers express a willingness to hire individuals with disabilities, very few have concrete policies or training programs in place to ensure those hires are supported effectively. In the case of epilepsy, many employers still rely on stereotypes or outdated medical information, assuming that any employee with a seizure disorder must be unfit for demanding roles. This is not only inaccurate but damaging, as most individuals with epilepsy are perfectly capable of fulfilling professional responsibilities with only minor accommodations. The impact of this lack of understanding is not limited to professional performance; it extends deeply into the mental health and self-perception of young employees.

Students who have invested years of effort in their education often arrive in the workplace eager to contribute, only to find themselves treated as liabilities rather than assets. The constant need to mask or conceal difficulties, whether it is hiding the need for breaks after a seizure or struggling silently with unclear instructions, leads to emotional exhaustion. Over time, this may contribute to burnout, depression, or withdrawal from the workforce altogether. In this sense, the employer's lack of awareness becomes a structural form of discrimination, not through overt exclusion but through neglect and inaction.

It is also important to recognize how subtle forms of bias perpetuate this cycle. In recruitment processes, interviews are often designed around social cues, quick responses, and body language, all of which can disadvantage candidates with autism. Employers may not even realize that their assessment methods are biased, because they have never considered that neurodivergent individuals might process

communication differently. Similarly, during the probationary period, employees with hidden disabilities may hesitate to disclose their needs for fear of being perceived as "difficult" or "less capable." This silence, born out of self-protection, reinforces the employer's belief that no special accommodations are required. The result is a workplace that systematically ignores the very diversity it claims to value.

Universities and disability support services have highlighted the importance of "reasonable adjustments" as a cornerstone of inclusion. However, in the professional world, the term "reasonable" is often interpreted in a way that minimizes responsibility. Employers may argue that adjustments are too costly, too disruptive, or too complicated to implement. Yet research consistently shows that most accommodations are neither expensive nor difficult to provide. For example, flexible working hours, clear written instructions, or the option to work remotely are adjustments that benefit not only employees with disabilities but the entire workforce. Despite this, many companies remain reluctant, suggesting that the barrier is not logistical but cultural: a failure to prioritize inclusivity over convenience.

The persistence of these barriers reveals a paradox in contemporary work culture. On the one hand, diversity and inclusion are frequently celebrated in mission statements and corporate values. On the other, when faced with the practical realities of supporting employees with conditions such as autism or epilepsy, many organizations fall short. This discrepancy suggests that the rhetoric of inclusivity is often more about reputation than transformation. Students entering the workforce soon learn that their success depends not only on their abilities but also on whether they encounter an employer willing to translate abstract commitments into concrete action.

	Employer perception (the rhetoric)	**Employee experience (the reality)**	**The "Paradox" highlight**

Commitment	~90% of companies claim to prioritize diversity and inclusion.	<5% of companies have specific support systems for neurodiversity (e.g., autism).	High abstract commitment; low specialized execution.
Comfort level	~75% of HR managers feel confident their workplace is "safe."	~80% of neurodivergent employees feel the need to "mask" or hide their condition.	A "safe" culture is often only safe for those who fit the norm.
Accommodations	~60% of employers believe accommodations are expensive/difficult.	~61% of accommodations cost €0; most of the rest are a one-time cost, with a median of about $300.	Perception of "cost" is a barrier, even when the actual cost is zero.
Hiring vs. Retention	High focus on "Diversity Hiring" targets and PR-friendly recruitment.	Low focus on long-term support, leading to higher turnover for disabled staff.	It is easier to hire for reputation than to support transformation.

Source: Own elaboration based also on Job Accommodation Network, Accommodation and Compliance: Low Cost, High Impact, U.S. Department of Labor, May 2023 available on https://askjan.org

Ultimately, the lack of awareness and accommodations from employers represents a systemic issue rather than an individual failing, especially young workers. It highlights how workplace structures are designed with a narrow conception of the “ideal worker”, a conception that often excludes neurodivergent experiences and overlooks the value of diverse cognitive perspectives. Until employers move beyond a surface-

level understanding of disability and commit to learning about and implementing genuine accommodations, students with autism, epilepsy, and other disabilities will continue to face barriers that diminish both their opportunities and the potential of the organizations they join.

4.2 How rigid systems fail neurodivergent employees

Workplaces are often built upon rigid systems that emphasize uniformity, predictability, and strict adherence to established processes. For many employees, these systems may appear neutral, even necessary, for ensuring efficiency and fairness. Yet for neurodivergent employees, especially those with autism or conditions such as epilepsy, these rigid structures often become barriers rather than supports. Instead of enabling productivity, they enforce a narrow idea of what “good work” looks like and leave little room for individual variation. The failure is not in the abilities of neurodivergent employees but in the inability of workplace systems to adapt to diverse needs.

One of the most obvious ways rigid systems fail is through scheduling and time management expectations. Many organizations demand consistent hours, strict punctuality, and uninterrupted presence during the standard workday. For employees managing epilepsy, this rigidity can become dangerous. A seizure may require recovery time that is unpredictable, and fatigue can strike at unexpected moments. If the system does not allow for flexibility, such as the ability to take short breaks, to shift working hours, or to work remotely when needed, employees may be forced to choose between their health and their professional obligations. Similarly, autistic employees may thrive in routines but struggle with sudden, unannounced schedule changes or extended overtime demands. When the system demands uniform compliance rather than adaptation, it undermines the very productivity it seeks to protect.

Performance evaluation is another area where rigidity disadvantages neurodivergent employees. Many organizations still rely on standardized metrics such as meeting quotas, rapid response rates, or participation in group discussions. While these measures may work for some, they often fail to capture the full range of skills that neurodivergent employees bring. For instance, an autistic employee may excel at tasks requiring sustained focus, attention to detail, or innovative problem solving, yet may not perform as well in fast paced group meetings where ideas are judged by how quickly and persuasively they are communicated. In such cases, rigid performance criteria reduce complex human capabilities to narrow benchmarks that disadvantage those who think and work differently. Communication structures within rigid workplaces also pose significant challenges. Many organizations place a premium on verbal fluency, quick decision-making in meetings, and informal networking as pathways to advancement. This disproportionately disadvantages neurodivergent employees, who may process information differently or require more time to formulate responses. The problem is compounded when written guidelines are absent, leaving important details communicated only through social cues or impromptu conversations. Employees with autism often find this ambiguity overwhelming, while those with epilepsy may struggle to follow conversations during moments of fatigue or post seizure recovery. In either case, the rigid reliance on a single communication style marginalizes those whose strengths emerge under different conditions.

Another dimension of rigidity is found in workplace culture and social expectations. Many companies unconsciously equate “team spirit” with conformity to certain social norms, participating in after work gatherings, making small talk during breaks, or engaging in constant collaboration. While these activities may appear harmless, they can exclude those who find social interaction challenging or draining. Autistic employees, for example, may find unstructured social settings overwhelming, while employees with epilepsy may avoid environments where fatigue, alcohol, or flashing lights increase health risks. When advancement is tied not only to professional

performance but also to social participation, rigid cultural expectations become a form of hidden discrimination.

Technology and accessibility provide another clear example of rigidity. Despite advances in assistive technologies and digital tools, many workplaces continue to enforce standardized software, platforms, and workflows without considering individual needs. A neurodivergent employee who relies on specific organizational tools, screen filters, or accessibility functions may be told that exceptions are not possible because “everyone must use the same system.” Such rigidity ignores the reality that flexibility in technology often improves efficiency for all employees, not just those with disabilities. By failing to allow for adaptive tools, organizations essentially close the door to innovation and reinforce exclusion. The consequences of rigid systems are not only personal but systemic. Employees who cannot conform to inflexible rules often face stalled career growth, higher turnover rates, and, in some cases, forced withdrawal from the workforce. For students transitioning into their first professional roles, this can be particularly devastating. After years of education they may enter workplaces hopeful for inclusion, only to find that the structures themselves are stacked against them. The emotional toll is significant: feelings of failure, frustration, and invisibility can erode confidence and ambition, discouraging individuals from pursuing career paths in which they might otherwise thrive. Yet perhaps the most striking aspect of rigid systems is their inefficiency. While organizations assume that standardization increases productivity, research suggests that adaptability and diversity in work styles often lead to better outcomes. Neurodivergent employees frequently bring unique problem-solving approaches, heightened creativity, or specialized knowledge that benefits the entire team. By forcing everyone into rigid working environments, companies not only harm individuals but also undermine their own potential for growth and innovation. The irony is that what is often presented as “efficiency” in rigid systems may, in fact, be one of the greatest obstacles to progress. Addressing these failures requires more than superficial adjustments; it demands a rethinking of what flexibility means in the

workplace. Flexibility should not be seen as a privilege granted on a case-by-case basis but as a structural principle integrated into policies, schedules, communication methods, and cultural expectations. By replacing rigidity with adaptability, organizations can create environments where neurodivergent employees are not merely surviving but thriving, and where the strengths of diverse minds are fully recognized. Until then, rigid workplace systems will continue to fail not only neurodivergent employees but also the organizations that desperately need their talent and perspective.

4.3 Strategies for adaptation and advocating for adjustments

For students with disabilities who are entering the workforce, coping strategies often become essential tools for survival in environments that remain slow to adapt. Autism and epilepsy, though very different in their manifestations, share one important feature when it comes to employment: both require a degree of flexibility that workplaces rarely provide. While the responsibility for creating inclusive systems should never rest solely on the shoulders of employees, the reality is that many neurodivergent workers find themselves needing to develop strategies for both managing immediate challenges and advocating for broader structural change.

Adaptation strategies can take many forms, depending on the individual and the demands of the workplace. For autistic employees, one common approach involves creating personal systems of structure within otherwise chaotic or unpredictable environments. This might include using calendars, reminders, or visual schedules to bring clarity to disorganized workflows. For employees with epilepsy, coping can involve carefully managing energy levels throughout the day, ensuring access to safe spaces in case of seizures, and planning routines that reduce unnecessary stress. These methods are not about compensating for deficiencies but about leveraging personal strengths to navigate environments that are not yet designed with inclusivity in mind.

Strategy type	Objective	Practical examples	Focus
Adaptation (self-management)	Survival and performance in a non-inclusive environment.	Using visual schedules, calendars, energy management, and personal routines.	Leveraging one's own skills to bridge the gap left by the employer.
Advocacy (structural change)	Transforming the workplace system to be inherently flexible.	Negotiating clear communication protocols, requesting flexible hours, and educating HR.	Shifting the responsibility from the employee to the organization.
Combined goal	Finding ways to succeed in a workplace not yet designed for inclusivity.	Requesting a dedicated safe/quiet space or formalizing emergency response plans.	Moving from "compensating for deficiencies" to "demanding structural equity."

Source: Own elaboration based also on Hurley-Walker D.S.J. and Richards C.L., "Survival and Success: Strategies for Navigating Non-Inclusive Work Environments for Employees with Disabilities," International Journal of Disability Management, vol. 18, pp. 45–59, 2023.

Technology has become a powerful ally in coping with rigid workplaces. Mobile applications for task management, seizure tracking, or sensory regulation provide tools that allow neurodivergent employees to exert greater control over their professional lives. For example, wearable devices can alert an individual with epilepsy to potential seizure activity, allowing them to step away from demanding tasks and minimize risk. Similarly, autistic employees may use software that reduces

distractions, filters sensory input, or provides text based alternatives to verbal communication. In many cases, these technologies not only improve individual coping but also demonstrate to employers the tangible benefits of tailored accommodations. While coping strategies are essential, they are not sufficient in themselves. Long term inclusion depends on advocacy through networks, mentors, and institutional allies. For many young professionals, the act of disclosing a disability to an employer is the first and most difficult step. Fear of stigma, misunderstanding, or career penalties often discourages disclosure. However, when handled strategically, disclosure can open pathways to necessary adjustments and signal to employers the importance of inclusive practices. Training in self-advocacy, often provided through university disability services, teaches students how to articulate their needs clearly, frame accommodations as mutually beneficial, and navigate conversations with supervisors in ways that emphasize collaboration rather than confrontation.

Employees who connect with supportive colleagues, mentors, or disability affinity groups often find it easier to navigate systemic barriers. For example, having a manager who understands epilepsy can mean the difference between being penalized for taking recovery breaks and being supported with flexible scheduling. Similarly, autistic employees may benefit from allies who advocate for clear communication practices in team settings. By amplifying individual voices through networks, advocacy can shift from isolated efforts to broader cultural change within organizations. Professional organizations, legal frameworks, and disability rights groups provide external support that employees can draw upon when employers remain unresponsive. In many countries, legislation mandates “reasonable accommodations,” but these rights are meaningful only if employees know how to claim them. Training programs, legal advice, and awareness campaigns empower neurodivergent employees to insist on adjustments that are not optional favours but legal and ethical obligations. Universities and career services offices can contribute by

equipping students with knowledge of their rights and by building partnerships with employers who demonstrate genuine commitment to inclusion.

A crucial aspect of advocacy is reframing adjustments not as burdens but as opportunities. Employers often resist accommodations because they view them as costly or disruptive. Yet studies repeatedly demonstrate that most accommodations are low cost and often increase productivity for the entire workforce. For example, flexible scheduling, which might be essential for an employee recovering from a seizure, also benefits parents, caregivers, and others seeking better work life balance. Clear written communication, helpful for autistic employees, also reduces misunderstandings across diverse teams. By presenting accommodations as improvements that extend beyond individual needs, advocates can counter the misconception that inclusivity benefits only a small minority. Adaptation intersects with resilience. Many neurodivergent employees develop a strong sense of adaptability and problem solving, precisely because they have had to navigate exclusionary systems. This resilience is an asset, but it should not be romanticized as a reason to maintain the status quo. The ultimate goal of coping and advocacy is not to prove that employees with autism or epilepsy can “overcome” barriers on their own, but to push for the removal of those barriers altogether. In this sense, coping strategies are immediate tools for survival, while advocacy represents the path toward transformation. Ultimately, strategies for coping and advocating highlight the dual reality faced by neurodivergent employees. On the one hand, they must find ways to manage daily challenges in workplaces that remain rigid and unaware. On the other, they must also become agents of change, pressing for adjustments that are not only necessary for their success but beneficial for organizations as a whole. Students entering the workforce should be encouraged to see themselves not as passive recipients of accommodation but as active participants in shaping inclusive futures. The responsibility for systemic change rests primarily with employers and institutions, but the voices of neurodivergent employees are powerful catalysts for progress. By combining coping with advocacy, they ensure that their presence is not only

acknowledged but valued, and that workplaces move closer to becoming spaces where every kind of mind can thrive.

Conclusions

The experiences of students entering the workforce with conditions such as autism or epilepsy highlight that structural shortcomings are not inevitable constraints, but rather the result of specific cultural and organizational choices. When employers fail to recognize the necessity of reasonable accommodations, they do more than commit an administrative oversight; they actively perpetuate cycles of exclusion. Rigid systems compound these inequities by demanding behavioral and cognitive conformity, often at the direct expense of the diversity they claim to value. However, the resilience and advocacy demonstrated by these employees serve as more than just a reaction to barriers—they provide tangible evidence of both the urgency and the possibility of profound change. While individual coping strategies offer immediate tools for navigating hostile or unrefined environments, authentic progress depends entirely on the ability of organizations to radically transform their internal culture by embedding flexibility and inclusivity as core operational pillars. Recognizing neurodiversity not as a liability to be managed, but as a strategic resource, allows organizations to move beyond mere legal compliance toward genuine equity. This paradigm shift requires abandoning standardized work models in favor of "accessible by design" infrastructures, where flexibility is a default setting rather than a reluctantly granted exception. In this scenario, the workplace ceases to be an obstacle and becomes an ecosystem capable of unlocking latent innovation and creativity. This approach does not merely empower employees with disabilities; it generates tangible benefits for the entire workforce by fostering collective well-being through the removal of cognitive and physical barriers. Ultimately, an organization's future success will depend on its willingness to dismantle the paradox between rhetoric and practice, translating abstract inclusivity into concrete, permanent action that benefits all.

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CHAPTER 5: WHAT GOOD EMPLOYERS DO – INCLUSIVE HR PRACTICES EXPLAINED

Introduction

When you apply for a job or start your first position, it can be hard to know what to expect from an employer and their HR practices. Good HR is not only about handling recruitment. It means supporting employees in daily life, making practices clear, and creating conditions where everyone has the chance to succeed.

A supportive workplace can look many different ways. Not every employer knows how to write perfect job postings or run flawless orientation programs. What matters more are the signs that HR and management care: they listen, answer questions, and make adjustments when needed.

For many neurodivergent students, internships or practical training are the best way to show their strengths. If a workplace offers these opportunities, it is a strong signal that the employer is willing to find the right ways to support employees.

Another important sign of a good employer is that they take time to listen to your experiences and collect feedback regularly. Continuous dialogue shows that the workplace is ready to improve and adapt based on employees' real needs, not just on fixed rules.

5.1 Inclusive Recruitment and Hiring Practices

Your first contact with a workplace is often the job posting and the recruitment process. In a good job posting, the tasks and required skills are explained clearly. Straightforward language makes it easier to understand and lowers the barrier to apply.

Sometimes postings may be vague. This does not necessarily mean the workplace is bad. Many employers simply do not yet know how to write clear postings. In these cases, you can ask HR or the recruiting manager for more details.

The recruitment process itself also reveals a lot. In an inclusive process, you are told in advance what stages are involved and when to expect an answer. This reduces stress and makes it easier to prepare.

Traditional interviews can be difficult. A positive sign of good HR is when you can also demonstrate your skills in other ways, such as through a practical task, trial work, or an internship. This benefits both the applicant and the employer.

5.2 Orientation and Everyday Practices

When you start a new job, clarity and predictability bring a sense of safety. In a good workplace, practices are explained in advance and can be trusted. Work schedules are announced early, and instructions are provided in writing if needed.

Orientation is one of the most important HR practices. In a good orientation, you have time to learn the steps of the job and access to materials you can return to later. Often a more experienced colleague or mentor supports you, so that you have someone to turn to with questions. A calm and structured start makes it easier to succeed.

Another good sign is that everyday matters are explained clearly: how shifts are arranged, how holidays are applied for, and how to access occupational health services. When these are easy to find, it shows good HR in action.

A strong start also means that you are not left alone. Many good workplaces assign a mentor or “buddy” to new employees. This person helps you learn unwritten rules, explains daily routines, and is available for questions. Having a trusted contact makes the beginning smoother and reduces the stress of starting in a completely new environment.

5.3 Accessible Instructions and Supportive Tools

Not everyone learns or remembers information in the same way. In a good workplace, instructions are provided in more than one form – not only verbally, but also in writing and often visually. This may include checklists, step-by-step instructions, schedules on noticeboards, or digital task lists.

Everyday practices, such as labeled cupboards, clear break rules, or written house rules, also make work more manageable. These are useful for all employees, not just neurodivergent ones. Visual tools and written instructions are especially helpful if you find it hard to remember details or if new situations feel stressful. They give you something concrete to follow and return to later. In a supportive workplace, you can always ask for instructions in a form that works best for you.

If these supports are not already in place, you can ask HR or your supervisor for them. Supportive HR listens and provides the missing instructions, making daily work easier and showing that the workplace wants to support you.

5.4 Technology That Supports Your Work

Technology can make daily work much easier. In a good workplace, you are offered or allowed to use tools that support memory, time management, and focus. These might include calendar reminders, task management apps, text readers, screen magnifiers, or noise-masking tools.

Sometimes the employer provides their own systems, and sometimes you can use familiar tools of your own. Some workplaces have strict data security rules that limit which software can be used. In these cases, a discussion with HR can help – often a solution can be found that supports you while also following the workplace's rules.

Good HR does not just allow the use of supportive technology but actively encourages it. This shows that your success at work is valued. If you know that certain apps or devices help you to stay organized and focused, it is worth mentioning them when you start. Many employers are open to safe ways of using these tools. Bringing them up shows that you are aware of how you work best, and this can make your daily routines smoother.

5.5 Everyday Signs of Inclusive HR

You can often recognize supportive HR from small but important practices. When these are present, they show that the workplace wants to support employees genuinely, not just in words:

- **Clear orientation:** You receive written materials and enough time to learn tasks, with the possibility to return to instructions later.
- **Mentoring and feedback:** At the beginning, an experienced colleague supports you, and you receive regular, constructive feedback. Feedback is given in a clear and supportive way.
- **Regular check-ins: Frequent** short check-ins work better than one long review. This helps you improve step by step and shows that the employer cares about your progress.
- **Flexible arrangements:** Possibility for part-time work, flexible shifts, or remote days when possible.
- **Internships and trial work:** Opportunities to try tasks in practice before permanent employment. This is often the best way to show your strengths and learn about the workplace.

Not every workplace has all of these practices, but the more of them you see, the stronger the sign that HR is committed to supporting employees. Even one of these can make daily life at work much easier.

5.6 Summary: What to Expect from Inclusive HR

Inclusive HR is not based on one fixed model. It means recognizing that employees' needs are different and must be addressed individually. When practices are clear, orientation is calm, and supportive tools are available, it is easier to succeed. Opportunities for internships, open communication, and tailored solutions are all signs that the workplace is ready to work with you.

You can also recognize inclusive HR by these features:

- **Individual approach:** Needs are considered separately, not with one-size-fits-all solutions.
- **Practical support:** HR and supervisors help during orientation and adjust work tasks when needed.

- **Safe environment:** In a supportive workplace, you can ask questions and express your needs. Psychological safety does not look the same for everyone, which is why ongoing dialogue is essential.

Conclusions

A good workplace does not expect you to manage everything alone. Instead, they are ready to make adjustments together with you. This shared responsibility allows you, and others, to focus on your strengths and succeed in your role.

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CHAPTER 6: BUILDING SOFT SKILLS FOR DIVERSE WORKPLACES

Introduction

Employers often emphasize technical knowledge when hiring, but interviews with both students and managers show that success in the workplace depends just as much on *soft skills*. These are the personal and social abilities that shape how we communicate, handle stress, collaborate, and adapt to change. For neurodivergent and trauma-affected students, soft skills can sometimes be more challenging to develop – but they can also become powerful strengths when practiced intentionally.

This chapter explores emotional regulation, communication, teamwork, and resilience. It provides practical strategies to strengthen these skills and highlights why they are essential for building confidence and thriving in diverse workplaces.

6.1 Emotional Regulation and Self-Confidence

Emotional regulation means recognizing and managing your emotions in a way that supports, rather than disrupts, your work. Self-confidence is the belief that you can handle challenges and learn from mistakes. Both are key for navigating daily stress and interactions.

Strategies for emotional regulation:

- Use grounding techniques (deep breathing, short breaks, stretching) when feeling overwhelmed.
- Identify early warning signs of stress and plan responses in advance.
- Keep a "toolbox" of calming strategies, such as music, movement, or a supportive colleague.

Building self-confidence:

- Focus on strengths and track achievements, even small ones.
- Reframe mistakes as opportunities to learn, not proof of failure.
- Prepare for tasks by breaking them into steps, which reduces anxiety and builds mastery.

Research insight: Studies show that students with stronger self-regulation are more resilient in transitions to work and achieve higher job satisfaction (Gross, 2015; OECD, 2021).

6.2 Communication Skills

Good communication is not only about what you say, but also how you listen and respond. Neurodivergent students may experience challenges with indirect language, tone, or non-verbal cues.

Practical communication tips:

- Use clear, direct language; avoid long or vague explanations.
- Practice *active listening*: repeat key points back to confirm understanding.
- Request written follow-ups for important instructions.
- Observe workplace communication styles, but don't be afraid to ask for clarification.

Social cues and feedback:

- Pay attention to body language, but ask directly when in doubt.
- Normalize asking: "Did I understand correctly?"
- Accept feedback as part of learning; ask for specific examples to improve.

Tip: Role-play conversations with mentors or peers to practice scripts for common situations (introducing yourself, asking for help, sharing progress).

6.3 Teamwork and Collaboration

Workplaces value individuals who can work effectively with others. Teamwork is not about being extroverted – it is about contributing, respecting roles, and building trust.

Skills for effective teamwork:

- Clarify your role and ask about others' responsibilities.
- Share progress updates regularly to keep the team informed.
- Respect different working styles; some colleagues prefer quick check-ins, others written updates.
- Practice compromise: find solutions that balance your needs with team goals.

Conflict resolution:

- Address issues early, before they escalate.
- Use "I statements" (e.g., "I felt left out of the discussion…") rather than blaming.
- Seek mediation from a mentor or supervisor if conflicts persist.

Research insight: The World Economic Forum (2020) identifies collaboration and teamwork as top skills for the future of work, especially in diverse environments where adaptability and cooperation are crucial.

6.4 Practicing Flexibility and Resilience

Flexibility means adjusting when situations change. Resilience is the ability to recover from setbacks. Both are especially important in modern workplaces, where tasks, technologies, and expectations shift rapidly.

Building flexibility:

- Reframe changes as opportunities rather than threats.
- Develop backup plans to reduce stress when routines shift.

- Practice small changes (new routes, new apps) to build tolerance for bigger transitions.

Building resilience:

- Focus on progress, not perfection.
- Maintain supportive networks inside and outside of work.
- Keep a healthy routine (sleep, diet, exercise), which strengthens mental endurance.

6.5 Practical Exercises for Soft Skills

To make these ideas actionable, here are some exercises you can try:

- **Daily reflection:** Write one strength you used at work each day.
- **Feedback log:** Keep a notebook of feedback you receive and how you responded.
- **Role-play practice:** With a peer or mentor, simulate asking for help, giving feedback, or handling conflict.
- **Resilience challenge:** Choose one small change in your daily routine each week and reflect on how you adapt.

These practices, when repeated, build habits of confidence, adaptability, and collaboration.

Conclusions

Soft skills are not “extra” – they are central to success in diverse workplaces. By practicing emotional regulation, strengthening communication, collaborating respectfully, and building resilience, students can not only adapt to workplaces but also influence them positively.

Employers consistently report that these abilities – listening, flexibility, teamwork, and confidence – matter as much as technical skills. For neurodivergent and trauma-affected students, learning these skills is also a way of building self-advocacy and ensuring that differences become strengths.

Soft skills grow with practice. Each conversation, team task, or challenge is an opportunity to refine them. With time, they become natural tools that support your career and allow you to thrive in inclusive, supportive environments.

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External resources:

- *American Psychological Association (2020)* resilience guides.
- *OECD Skills Outlook (2021)* on adaptability and lifelong learning.

CHAPTER 7: INTERNSHIPS AND FIRST JOBS – WHAT YOU CAN LEARN AND EXPECT

Introduction

Internships and mentoring programs are increasingly recognized as vital tools for easing the transition from education to employment. For neurodivergent students, however, this pathway can be particularly uneven. Traditional internship models often fail to consider the sensory, cognitive, or communication needs of individuals whose brains work differently, resulting not only in missed opportunities but also in increased anxiety, burnout, and exclusion. This chapter outlines how internships can be designed as inclusive, confidence-building learning spaces for neurodivergent students. It draws from recent research on mentorship programs, supported work-based learning, and inclusive practices that address the unique challenges and strengths associated with neurodivergence.

7.1 Bridge the Gap: How Internships and Mentoring Connect Education to Employment

The leap from university to the workplace is steep for most students, but for neurodivergent learners, it is often a cliff edge. In rigid, fast-paced environments where unwritten rules dominate, even the most capable students may find themselves excluded from full participation. Internships that are not designed with neurodiversity in mind may unintentionally magnify these gaps.

According to Sullivan et al. (2025)*, mentorship program*s that include individualized support and explicit training help bridge this gap by translating theoretical learning into applicable skills. Similarly, Morris et al. (2022) emphasize tha*t peer mentoring*, particularly when neurodivergent students are matched with trained peers, improves navigation through complex social and professional expectations.

Internships that are thoughtfully integrated into educational journeys, with pre-placement preparation and during placement coaching, allow students to gradually acclimate to real-world expectations while still feeling anchored to supportive systems.

7.2 Build Confidence: The Value of Real-World Exposure

Traditional academic metrics rarely capture the full range of neurodivergent strengths. Real-world work placements provide students the opportunity to see what they are capable of outside of lecture halls, where linear thinking and narrow assessment dominate.

Ambitious about Autism (AaA), a UK-based autism education and employment charity. With the aim to help autistic children and young people have their voices heard, and to ensure they are included and supported in education and employment, ran a campaign, Employ Autism, to emphasise employment inequalities for autistic young people. AaA identified a lack of work experience opportunities as a key barrier to accessing employment. Therefore, they developed two work experience programmes: (1) Autism Exchange, offering paid work experience for autistic people aged 18 years and older, and (2) Supported Internships, in collaboration with DFN Project SEARCH, providing unpaid work experience for autistic people between the ages of 16 – 25 with an Education Health and Care plan. Interns in these programs reported higher levels of self-efficacy (self-efficacy is a person's belief in their ability to complete a task or achieve a goal) after their placements, noting that the internship helped them feel “more capable, more independent, and more confident” (Ashworth et al., 2024). For many, it was the first time their work had a direct impact or was seen by others in a meaningful context.

Real-world exposure does not just help neurodivergent students gain skills—it helps them identify where their strengths show up best. For example, pattern recognition, hyperfocus, and logical structuring may not stand out in seminars but can thrive in

research, coding, or design tasks. Broad-Futures reports that more than 90% of their participants transition to work or education after internships, underscoring the role of hands-on, experiential learning in unlocking potential.

7.3 Designing effective inclusive Internships that work

Neurodivergent interns are not "less capable" of performing job tasks—they are often less supported. According to the UCL study (Remington et al., 2022), autistic interns working at Deutsche Bank emphasized the value of clear task descriptions, predictable routines, and flexible communication styles. Without this structure, interns were left confused, overwhelmed, or disengaged.

Effective internship models include:

- **Gradually shifting responsibilities**-One can start by observing then assisting in a task and eventually leading the task.
- **Regular check-ins** with mentors or supervisors
- **Multiple feedback formats** (written, verbal, visual)
- **Sensory/environmental accommodations**, such as access to quiet spaces or remote work options.

7.4 Essential elements for effective mentorship

•Understanding Neurodiversity

It is important to understand what neurodiversity is and how it affects individuals in the workplace. Neurodiversity refers to the natural variation in human brains and cognition, including conditions like ADHD, autism, dyslexia, and others. These differences influence the way persons process information, communicate, and approach problem-solving. Understanding neurodiversity helps mentors to empathize with these individuals and tailor their approach to meet individual needs.

•Clear and open communication

Strong mentoring relationships rely on effective communication, which is especially important when collaborating with neurodivergent people. Given that neurodivergent individuals might understand information in their own way, it is critical to make sure communication is clear, direct, and consistent.

•Focus on strengths, not just challenges.

Neurodivergent persons have many talents that mentors need to unlock. By helping them do that, neurodivergent persons can thrive in a workplace.

•Mentoring methods that are inflexible can obstruct the progress of neurodivergent individuals. Know that flexibility is important-Flexibility in how, when, and where mentoring takes place.

•Create a safe and supportive environment.

For neurodivergent individuals, experiencing a sense of security and encouragement is fundamentally important for their achievements at work. A mentor's objective should be to foster a setting where these individuals feel comfortable and seek assistance when needed.

7.5 Benefits of mentorship for neurodivergent students

•**Skill development**: Guided instruction can foster growth in concentration, discipline, communication and empathy, decision-making, self-advocacy. Real-world experiences provide significant benefits through chances to participate in social interactions.

•**Recognition of strengths and weaknesses**: Career pathways: Mentors can help recognize strengths, weaknesses, and skills to develop a tailored roadmap for professional advancement.

•**Achievement of goals**: Mentors support in establishing and reaching objectives, facilitating the breakdown of overwhelming "big picture" ambitions into achievable tasks.

•**Boosted confidence**: Mentorship can increase confidence and empower individuals to recognize their own value. Neurodivergent persons confirm their uniqueness, and they feel esteemed and capable. It also increases their social confidence, and this helps interns ask for support without fear of being seen as incompetent.

•**Create role models**: Seeing their mentors as role models and as people that succeeded they can understand that success is achievable without sacrificing authenticity. This visibility challenges stereotypes and broadens neurodivergent individuals' sense of what is possible.

•**Emotional regulation**: Mentors can provide support, and this can lead to improved self-efficacy and reduced anxiety or depression.

•**Reduced isolation**: Mentorship can make neurodivergent individuals feel less isolated and can give the feeling of belonging.

•**Adaptability:** Through mentoring, one can talk about difficulties and adjust to new situations and responsibilities at their own pace.

7.6 Feedback

Mentors must give clear, constructive and specific feedback to neurodivergent students. This feedback must:

•**Be specific and direct**: The mentor must use direct language and not vague language and be extremely specific when providing feedback to the neurodivergent student.

•**Balanced feedback:** The mentor must tell in plain language to the neurodivergent student what he/she is doing right and what is wrong. The mentor must highlight the strengths and achievements together with areas for improvement to maintain motivation.

•**Provide clear goals**: Define specific objectives rather than broad assignments.

•**Focus on strengths**: The mentor must focus on the strengths of the neurodivergent student to use their unique skills and talents to reach their goals.

•**Give processing time**: The mentors know that some neurodivergent students need more time to process feedback; therefore, he/she must give all time needed.

•**Provide feedback privately**: The mentor must give feedback privately to prevent embarrassment and give the neurodivergent student time to process it effectively.

7.7 Benefits of feedback to neurodivergent students

•**Improved performance**: Specific, actionable feedback clarifies expectations and helps neurodivergent students understand the effect of their actions. This can lead to increased productivity and performance.

•**Builds confidence**: Consistent, positive feedback builds confidence

•**Greater autonomy**: Clear feedback helps neurodivergent students to work independently.

7.8 Learning Space: Shifting the Purpose of Internships

Internships are often treated as extended auditions, filtering out those who do not immediately conform to conventional expectations of professionalism. This approach is fundamentally misaligned with the principles of neurodivergent inclusion. Internships should not be gatekeeping mechanisms; they should be educational spaces where learners grow through support and reflection.

As outlined in the Engage to Change project (2024), young people with intellectual disabilities and autistic traits learn best by doing, with tailored coaching embedded in real work contexts. The same is true for many neurodivergent students. A poorly designed internship can lead to self-doubt and disengagement, while an inclusive one can reveal new possibilities and shift internal narratives.

Organizations like Work Design Magazine emphasize that “internships should develop, not assess,” particularly for those whose paths into employment have already been shaped by barriers. When supervisors see mistakes as data, not failure, interns are free to learn, iterate, and gradually build the competencies they need.

7.9 Tips: Practical Suggestions for Inclusive Internships

Based on the research and implementation models reviewed, the following practices are recommended for future internship programs focused on neurodivergent inclusion:

For Internship Designers or Coordinators

- Use clear, consistent communication. Avoid vague instructions.
- Provide pre-internship orientations that include role expectations, sensory considerations, and what to do when support is needed.
- Incorporate regular, structured feedback sessions (e.g., weekly debriefs).
- Design the internship with flexibility—remote options, adjustable hours, or workload pacing.

For Mentors and Supervisors

- Be trained in neurodiversity awareness and inclusive communication.
- Break down tasks into smaller steps and check understanding without condescension.
- Normalize asking questions, requesting accommodations, or needing reminders.

For Interns (Students)

- Create a personal checklist: What supports do I need? What throws me off?
- Practice self-advocacy (which is the ability to communicate what your needs are) scripts for requesting written instructions, check-ins, or feedback.
- Reflect weekly: What worked well? What drained me? What could I do differently?

What support do I need as a student during my internship?

- I would like others to communicate in a clear, direct, and consistent language.
- I would like to have only one person that will be my mentor. This person will guide me, support me, and provide me with feedback during my internship. This mentor will be flexible on how, when and where mentoring will take place.
- I will have regular check-ins with my mentor during which he/she will provide me with direct and specific feedback. I would like to know what I am doing right and what I am doing wrong and how I can improve.
- I would like my mentor to provide me with feedback privately.
- During my internship I will work in a safe and supportive environment, and I will have all accommodations needed according to my sensory needs in order to feel comfortable and be able to do well in my job.

How do I ask for feedback?

- Before asking for feedback it is very important to decide on the best mode to use for my communication with your supervisor/mentor: face-to-face conversation is best, but it might be better to communicate via email, printed letter, or over the phone and also decide which is the best place (in case of face to face communication) and best time to ask for feedback
- I must ask for feedback in a polite manner. It is a proven tactic that can help influence a person to act in your favour. Starting a relationship on a positive note can make advocating much easier.

  -"Could I get your feedback on the xxxxxxx when you have a chance? I'm looking for specific suggestions on how to make it stronger."

  - "I'd like to get your perspective on the xxxxxxxx. What is working well, and what could be improved? Your feedback would be very helpful."

- When I am asking for feedback from my supervisor/mentor, I can say that this feedback is valuable for me because I am neurodivergent; therefore, constructive feedback can help me improve.

Conclusions

Internships, when structured inclusively, are more than temporary placements. Internships can be inclusive learning spaces and can become critical points of integration, not exclusion.

Effective internship models include progressive responsibilities, regular check-ins, multiple feedback formats, and sensory/environmental accommodations.

The benefits from mentorship and feedback within internships are numerous. If students know what support they need during an internship and how they can ask for feedback then they will gain both knowledge and experience through their internships and will become more capable, confident, independent and will unlock their potential.

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CHAPTER 8: WORKPLACE CULTURE – HOW TO KNOW IF A JOB IS RIGHT FOR YOU

Introduction

Workplace culture plays a decisive role in determining whether a job is suitable for employees, particularly students with disabilities such as autism or epilepsy. Understanding how values, communication, and behaviors shape an organization is critical to recognizing whether it will provide support and opportunities for growth. Inclusive cultures anticipate diverse needs, implement accommodations, and foster a sense of belonging, whereas exclusive environments often rely on unspoken rules and rigid norms. Neurodivergent students face unique challenges navigating workplaces that fail to accommodate differences or recognize individual strengths. Identifying cultural indicators during recruitment, interviews, and early interactions can prevent frustration and exclusion. Moreover, self-reflection and awareness of personal needs allow students to assess compatibility with potential employers. This essay explores the characteristics of workplace culture, signs of inclusivity versus exclusivity, and strategies for finding supportive environments. Understanding workplace culture is crucial for students with disabilities, including autism and epilepsy, as it directly influences their ability to thrive professionally. This chapter examines and analyzes the following key aspects that define an inclusive work environment and offers practical strategies for identifying and securing such opportunities:

- Workplace culture is shaped by values, communication, and behavior, which influence whether employees feel supported or excluded.
- Inclusive cultures anticipate diverse needs and provide accommodations, fostering belonging for neurodivergent employees, while exclusive cultures rely on rigid norms and unspoken rules.

- Observing organizational practices and behaviors, from leadership attitudes to peer interactions, helps identify whether inclusion is genuine or performative.
- Communication clarity and transparency are essential for autistic and epileptic employees to navigate tasks, expectations, and social norms effectively.
- Research, networking, and self-reflection are key strategies for students to find workplaces aligned with their needs, strengths, and well-being.
- Supportive environments empower professional growth, well-being, and long-term success by integrating neurodivergent perspectives and providing meaningful accommodations.

8.1 How Values, Communication, and Behavior Shape a Workplace

Workplace culture is a complex system of shared values, communication practices, and observable behaviors that together shape the daily experiences of employees. For students with disabilities, including those with autism spectrum conditions or epilepsy, understanding these elements is particularly crucial when evaluating potential employment opportunities. While many organizations publicly endorse diversity and inclusion, the lived reality often depends on how values are enacted through communication and behavior at all levels of the workplace. In other words, a company may formally state that it values accessibility, fairness, and adaptability, yet fail to translate these principles into practical policies or everyday interactions. For neurodivergent individuals, such gaps between rhetoric and practice can result in environments that are not only challenging but actively exclusionary, limiting both personal growth and professional achievement.

Values in a workplace guide priorities, decision-making, and interpersonal expectations. When inclusion is genuinely prioritized, organizations actively consider the needs of all employees, rather than assuming that a standard model of productivity works universally. For instance, a company that values adaptability may provide flexible work hours, remote work options, or individualized task planning to accommodate the varying needs of employees. These measures are particularly

relevant for individuals with epilepsy, who may experience seizures or fatigue, or for autistic employees who benefit from predictable routines and minimized sensory overload. On the other hand, workplaces that emphasize conformity or traditional "ideal worker" norms tend to marginalize employees who do not fit these expectations, often leading to stress, anxiety, and diminished performance. Students entering such environments may find that their strengths, creativity, and problem-solving abilities are undervalued simply because the system does not recognize or accommodate neurodivergent ways of working.

Cultural elements	**Inclusive culture (authentic)**	**Exclusionary culture (performative)**	**Impact on neurodivergent employees**
Values	Adaptability and equity	Conformity and tradition	Outcome and values either empower strengths or marginalize potential.
Communication	Clarity and transparency	Implicit and socially cued	Predictability fosters confidence and ambiguity leads to isolation and stress.
Behavior	Empathy and flexibility	Judgment and insensitivity	Safe environments support mental health and poor behavior leads to burnout.

Source: Adapted from Doyle N., "Neurodiversity at work: a biopsychosocial model and the impact on working adults", British Medical Bulletin, vol. 135, no. 1, pp. 108–125, Oct. 2020.

Communication is another cornerstone of workplace culture. It encompasses both formal channels, such as meetings, emails, and performance reviews, and informal exchanges among colleagues. For neurodivergent employees, clarity and predictability in communication can make the difference between feeling included and feeling isolated. In workplaces where instructions are clear, expectations are transparent, and feedback is constructive, employees with autism or epilepsy can more easily navigate tasks and contribute effectively. Conversely, organizations that rely heavily on implicit knowledge, unspoken rules, or social cues may create barriers for neurodivergent employees, who may interpret or respond to these cues differently. For example, an autistic student might struggle in an environment where decision-making relies on informal hallway conversations or subtle body language, leading to misunderstandings or missed opportunities despite their competence and potential. Observable behaviors, how people act and interact within the workplace, serve as a tangible reflection of underlying values and communication norms. Leadership behavior is particularly influential; managers who model openness, empathy, and flexibility set a standard for the entire team. Conversely, leaders who dismiss accommodation requests, respond poorly to differences, or implicitly reward only conventional behaviors signal to all employees that divergence from the norm is undesirable. Peer behaviors also contribute to the cultural landscape: colleagues who are supportive, patient, and collaborative help create a sense of belonging, whereas environments characterized by exclusionary gossip, microaggressions, or insensitivity can amplify stress for neurodivergent employees. Students with disabilities often learn to read these behavioral cues as indicators of whether an organization's professed values are authentic or performative.

The impact of workplace culture on mental health and job satisfaction is well-documented. Neurodivergent employees in inclusive environments report higher

engagement, motivation, and overall well-being, while those in exclusive or unaccommodating settings experience higher rates of stress, anxiety, and burnout. For example, students with epilepsy may feel unsafe or unsupported in workplaces that do not account for the possibility of seizures or that stigmatize absences for health reasons. Autistic employees may experience sensory overload in open-plan offices without quiet spaces or structured workflows. These environmental and cultural factors influence not only immediate performance but also long-term career trajectories, retention, and professional confidence.

Understanding how values, communication, and behavior interact to shape culture can also empower students to make informed career choices. Observing how teams interact during interviews, asking targeted questions about policies and accommodations, and seeking feedback from current or former employees provide insights into whether a workplace is likely to be supportive. Organizations that demonstrate consistency between stated values and observable behaviors tend to offer environments where neurodivergent employees can leverage their strengths, contribute meaningfully, and grow professionally. Conversely, inconsistencies, such as a commitment to inclusion on paper that is not reflected in day-to-day practices, can serve as early warning signs that the organization may not meet the employee's needs.

In addition, workplace culture influences innovation and team dynamics. Inclusive cultures that accommodate diverse cognitive styles often unlock creative problem-solving, attention to detail, and novel approaches that benefit the entire organization. Neurodivergent employees frequently possess unique perspectives and specialized skills that, when supported, enhance organizational performance. The ability of a workplace to integrate these contributions depends not only on formal policies but on the subtler cultural elements of respect, communication, and behavioral norms. Organizations that fail to cultivate these elements risk not only excluding talented individuals but also losing opportunities for growth, creativity, and competitive advantage. Finally, it is essential for students with disabilities to develop

the skills to assess and navigate workplace culture proactively. Awareness of how values are demonstrated, how communication occurs, and how behaviors signal inclusion or exclusion equips students to identify environments aligned with their needs. By combining observational skills, self-knowledge, and inquiry, students can select workplaces where their potential is recognized, accommodated, and valued. Cultures that genuinely reflect inclusive values provide a foundation for success, whereas environments that lack alignment between values, communication, and behavior present significant challenges that may hinder career development, personal well-being, and professional satisfaction.

8.2 Signs of Inclusive vs. Exclusive Culture

Recognizing the difference between inclusive and exclusive workplace cultures is critical for students entering the workforce, particularly those with disabilities such as autism or epilepsy. Inclusive cultures proactively anticipate the diverse needs of employees, implement accessible systems, and foster a sense of belonging, whereas exclusive cultures often rely on unspoken rules, rigid norms, and assumptions that all employees can perform in the same way. For neurodivergent individuals, the consequences of misaligned culture are significant: environments that fail to support differences can lead to stress, reduced productivity, social isolation, and, in some cases, early withdrawal from the workforce. Understanding the indicators of inclusivity or exclusion empowers students to make informed career decisions and seek organizations that provide both opportunity and support. One hallmark of inclusive culture is the presence of clear policies and consistent practices that support diversity and accessibility. For example, organizations may have formal procedures for requesting accommodations, guidelines for flexible scheduling, or processes to ensure that meetings and communications are accessible. These practices signal that the organization values each employee’s contributions and is willing to adapt systems to meet varying needs. In contrast, exclusive cultures often lack transparency or consistency; requests for accommodations may be ignored, denied without

justification, or treated as exceptional rather than standard. Students with epilepsy, for instance, may require periodic breaks, modified workstations, or adjusted lighting, while autistic students may need predictable routines and reduced sensory stimulation. The availability—or absence—of such accommodations is a tangible reflection of the organization's cultural commitment to inclusion.

Behavioral cues within the workplace provide additional insight into cultural orientation. Inclusive environments are characterized by respectful interactions, active listening, and visible support from leadership. Managers model empathy and responsiveness, while colleagues demonstrate collaboration and patience. Neurodivergent employees in these environments report feeling valued, understood, and safe to communicate their needs. In contrast, exclusive cultures often manifest through subtle or overt behaviors that marginalize differences: employees may be excluded from informal networks, subjected to microaggressions, or pressured to conform to unspoken norms. For autistic students, the social expectations of networking or after-work activities may become barriers if the culture does not accommodate alternative forms of participation. Similarly, students with epilepsy may feel anxious in workplaces that stigmatize absences or fail to recognize health-related needs.

Communication practices are a critical component of inclusivity. Inclusive organizations prioritize clarity, accessibility, and feedback mechanisms that allow employees to express concerns safely. Written guidelines, structured meetings, and transparent decision-making help all employees, particularly those who process information differently or require additional time to respond. Exclusive cultures, by contrast, rely heavily on informal, opaque communication channels that favor neurotypical social processing. Important instructions conveyed through casual conversations or implicit expectations can disadvantage neurodivergent employees, leading to misunderstandings, frustration, and missed opportunities. The presence or absence of accessible communication is a key signal that students can observe when evaluating potential workplaces.

Another indicator of inclusivity is the degree to which leadership demonstrates commitment to diversity beyond statements or superficial gestures. Companies that actively celebrate achievements of employees with different abilities, provide training for managers on neurodiversity, and involve disabled employees in decision-making processes send a powerful message: inclusion is a core value, not an optional policy. Exclusive organizations, in contrast, may make public statements about diversity without implementing structural changes, resulting in a culture where neurodivergent employees must continually advocate for basic recognition and accommodations. This discrepancy between rhetoric and practice often becomes apparent during recruitment, orientation, and early employment experiences.

The physical and digital environment also reflects inclusivity. Accessible workspaces, adaptive technologies, and quiet areas for sensory regulation signal that neurodiverse needs are considered in day-to-day operations. For example, providing noise-cancelling headphones, adjustable lighting, or remote work options allows autistic and epileptic employees to manage their conditions while maintaining productivity. Exclusive cultures may neglect these considerations, creating environments that are physically or psychologically taxing for employees with disabilities. Observing workspace design, technology use, and support resources can provide early indications of whether a company is truly inclusive.

Finally, students can assess culture by seeking feedback from current or former employees. Informal networks, mentorship programs, and employee resource groups often reveal whether policies and values are consistently applied. Inclusive workplaces foster environments where employees feel empowered to discuss challenges openly and receive support without fear of judgment or retaliation. Exclusive workplaces, in contrast, often discourage dialogue about accommodations or differences, implicitly signaling that deviation from the norm is undesirable. By carefully evaluating these signs, students with disabilities can identify organizations that not only respect their needs but actively enable their professional growth. In sum, recognizing inclusive versus exclusive culture requires attention to policies,

behaviors, communication, leadership, environment, and peer interactions. For students with autism or epilepsy, this understanding is not merely academic; it is a practical tool for navigating career choices, ensuring both well-being and long-term professional success. Awareness of these indicators equips students to select workplaces where they can thrive, rather than simply survive, and to advocate effectively when necessary.

8.3 How to Find Supportive Environments

Finding a supportive workplace is a critical step for students with disabilities, including those with autism spectrum conditions or epilepsy, as they transition from education to professional life. A supportive environment is characterized not only by formal policies but also by everyday practices, leadership behaviors, and peer interactions that collectively foster inclusion, safety, and opportunity. For neurodivergent students, identifying such workplaces requires a combination of research, observation, and self-reflection. Understanding personal needs, assessing organizational culture, and leveraging available resources are all essential to ensure that the chosen work environment aligns with both professional ambitions and well-being. Researching potential employers is an essential first step.

Students should examine whether organizations have explicit diversity and inclusion policies, reasonable accommodation procedures, or recognition for supporting employees with disabilities. European initiatives, such as the EU Disability Strategy 2021-2030, provide frameworks for evaluating whether companies adhere to accessibility standards and promote equitable practices. Students can also consult industry reports, company reviews, or awards for inclusivity to gauge organizational commitment. For instance, companies recognized by advocacy groups for implementing neurodiversity programs often demonstrate a higher likelihood of offering meaningful support and practical accommodations. Similarly, professional networks or online forums can provide insights from current and former employees about how policies translate into day-to-day experiences.

Interviews and informational meetings offer additional opportunities to assess supportiveness. Asking targeted questions about flexibility, mentorship, accommodations, and sensory considerations allows students to gain a clearer understanding of what working in the organization might entail. Observing how interviewers respond to these inquiries is equally important: receptive, detailed, and empathetic responses often indicate a culture that takes inclusion seriously, whereas vague or dismissive answers may signal an environment that is less accommodating. Furthermore, students can look for concrete examples of inclusive practices, such as structured onboarding, clear performance evaluation systems, and access to assistive technology. These indicators provide tangible evidence of whether the organization is capable of supporting neurodivergent employees effectively.

Networking is another powerful tool for identifying supportive environments. Engaging with professional associations, disability advocacy groups, and alumni networks can reveal insights into company culture that are not apparent in official communications. Mentors or peer advisors with experience navigating neurodivergent challenges can provide practical advice, recommend workplaces that prioritize inclusion, and highlight potential pitfalls to avoid. For autistic students, mentors can explain unwritten social norms, workplace expectations, or communication patterns that might otherwise be confusing. Students with epilepsy can gain guidance on identifying workplaces that respect health-related absences, offer safe spaces, and maintain flexible scheduling. These networks not only provide information but also emotional support, reinforcing confidence as students enter the workforce.

Self-assessment plays a key role in finding supportive workplaces. Students should reflect on their own needs, strengths, and limitations to determine which environments are most compatible with their well-being and productivity. Autistic employees may require structured routines, predictable schedules, or quiet work areas, while those with epilepsy might prioritize workplaces with accessible facilities, flexible hours, or health-conscious policies. Recognizing these needs allows students

to filter potential employers and prioritize opportunities where their abilities can be fully leveraged. Additionally, understanding one's own communication style, sensory sensitivities, and coping strategies empowers students to advocate effectively when accommodations are necessary.

Strategic pillar	Concrete actions and tools	Indicators of inclusion
Preliminary research	Reviewing D&I policies, industry reports, and EU Disability Strategy 2021-2030 compliance.	Recognition from advocacy groups and explicit neurodiversity or health-conscious programs.
Interviews and observation	Asking targeted questions on flexibility, mentorship, sensory needs, and onboarding.	Detailed, empathetic responses; evidence of assistive technology and structured feedback.
Networking and peer support	Engaging with professional associations, alumni networks, and disability advocacy groups.	Insights into "unwritten rules" and confirmation that policies translate into daily practice.
Self-assessment	Reflecting on personal sensory triggers, routine needs, and communication styles.	Alignment between individual needs (e.g., quiet zones or flexible hours) and the company's model.

Source: Adapted from Lindsay S., Ahmed E., and Aly S., "A Scoping Review of Workplace Disclosure and Accommodation Advocacy for Neurodivergent Employees", Journal of Occupational Rehabilitation, vol. 33, no.1, pp.15–32, 2023

Evaluating organizational culture through observation and interaction is also crucial. Supportive environments consistently demonstrate alignment between stated values and everyday behaviors. Leadership that models empathy, responsiveness, and inclusion sets a tone that permeates the organization. Colleagues who respect differences, collaborate, and support accommodations contribute to a sense of belonging. Conversely, workplaces that fail to translate policies into practice often reveal exclusionary patterns through behaviors such as ignoring accommodation requests, emphasizing conformity over competence, or penalizing employees for

differences. By paying attention to these cues, students can make informed decisions before committing to a role, reducing the likelihood of encountering frustration or barriers later. Finally, proactive advocacy complements the search for supportive workplaces. Even in inclusive environments, students may need to request specific accommodations, explain their needs, or negotiate flexible arrangements. Preparing clear, evidence-based requests and framing accommodations as mutually beneficial helps ensure positive outcomes. For example, proposing structured feedback sessions or assistive technology may improve both individual performance and team efficiency. In addition, cultivating relationships with managers, human resources personnel, and peer allies strengthens the network of support available within the organization. By combining research, observation, self-reflection, and advocacy, students can identify workplaces that not only accommodate their needs but actively foster professional growth, satisfaction, and long-term success. Finding a supportive workplace is a multifaceted process that involves evaluating policies, observing behaviors, networking, and self-assessment. For students with autism or epilepsy, understanding both formal and informal aspects of organizational culture is essential to ensure alignment with personal needs and professional goals. By approaching this search strategically, students increase the likelihood of entering environments where they can thrive, contribute meaningfully, and build sustainable careers while maintaining their health and well-being. Supportive workplaces do more than provide accommodations; they create the conditions for neurodivergent employees to reach their full potential and enrich the organization with diverse perspectives and skills.

Conclusions

The alignment between organizational values, communication, and behavior serves as the primary diagnostic tool for determining whether a workplace will truly support neurodivergent employees or merely offer performative gestures. Inclusive environments do not simply tolerate difference; they actively empower students with autism or epilepsy by providing robust accommodations, flexible operational

practices, and a culturally embedded support system that normalizes diverse ways of working. This systemic integration ensures that support is not a bureaucratic exception but a standard feature of the professional ecosystem.

Conversely, exclusive cultures tend to marginalize cognitive or physical differences by prioritizing rigid conformity over actual competence, which inevitably creates chronic stress and hinders the professional development of talented individuals. Finding the right workplace is therefore a proactive journey that requires a sophisticated combination of external research, direct observation, and strategic networking. This process must be grounded in an honest self-assessment where students identify their specific sensory, cognitive, and health-related requirements alongside their unique professional strengths. Supportive organizations distinguish themselves by moving beyond the myth of the "universal employee," instead harnessing the unique perspectives and problem-solving abilities that neurodivergent individuals contribute to a team. By learning to recognize key indicators of inclusivity, such as transparent communication and empathetic leadership, and by advocating for accommodations with confidence, students can filter out exclusionary environments in favor of those where they can thrive. Ultimately, the successful alignment of personal requirements with a compatible organizational culture is the most reliable predictor of long-term professional success, job satisfaction, and sustainable career growth.

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CHAPTER 9: ADVOCATING FOR YOURSELF AT WORK

Introduction

Starting a new job or internship can feel exciting but also overwhelming. Beyond learning the tasks, many students worry about how to bring their full selves into the workplace. Questions such as *Should I share my diagnosis? How do I ask for accommodations? What are my rights? What if I need to say no?* are common.

Interviews with students revealed that one of the greatest challenges is not the work itself but navigating how to communicate needs and boundaries in a respectful and confident way. Self-advocacy is therefore a core skill for entering the world of work.

Advocating for yourself does not mean asking for "special treatment." It means ensuring you have the right tools, conditions, and support to succeed. This chapter provides practical strategies for disclosure, requesting accommodations, understanding your rights, and expressing boundaries – skills that protect your well-being and help you thrive.

9.1 Deciding Whether, When, and How to Disclose a Diagnosis

Disclosure is one of the most difficult decisions for neurodivergent and trauma-affected students. It is deeply personal, and there is no single correct answer.

Key points about disclosure:

- **You are not obligated** to disclose your diagnosis unless you wish to or unless formal accommodations require documentation.
- **Timing matters** – some people disclose during the recruitment process, others after building trust with colleagues or supervisors.
- **Level of detail** can vary – you can focus on functional needs rather than labels.

Examples of disclosure strategies:

- Minimal disclosure: “I work best when I receive written instructions after meetings.”
- Partial disclosure: “I have a condition that makes it difficult to process long verbal explanations. Written notes are very helpful.”
- Full disclosure: naming the diagnosis, often with supporting documentation from a doctor or university disability office.

Research insight: Studies show that young employees who disclose thoughtfully are more likely to receive accommodations, but disclosure also carries risks such as stigma or misunderstanding (Lindsay et al., 2018; Santuzzi & Waltz, 2016). Many experts recommend preparing a “disclosure script” and practicing it with a trusted mentor before sharing at work.

9.2 Asking for Accommodations

Accommodations are adjustments that enable you to perform effectively. They are not favors – they are your right. According to the **International Labour Organization (ILO)** and **Job Accommodation Network (Jan, 2023)**, most accommodations are low-cost or cost-free but significantly increase productivity and retention.

Examples of common accommodations:

- Clear written instructions alongside verbal explanations
- Flexible start and finish times
- Access to a quiet space or noise-reducing tools
- Extra short breaks to reduce fatigue
- Use of supportive technology (speech-to-text, planning apps, screen filters)
- Adjusted workload pacing or deadline extensions in certain cases

How to ask effectively:

1. **Be specific** – explain exactly what helps ("Could we send task lists by email after meetings?").
2. **Frame positively** – emphasize how the adjustment supports your contribution ("This helps me stay focused and avoid mistakes").
3. **Propose solutions** – rather than only describing challenges, suggest practical options.
4. **Keep it collaborative** – present accommodations as part of teamwork, not as demands.

Evidence: A JAN employer survey (2019–2024) found that 61% of accommodations cost nothing, and a further 33% involved a one-time cost, with a median of $300. The benefits – increased productivity, reduced turnover, improved morale – far outweigh the costs.

9.3 Understanding Your Rights and Legal Protections

Knowing your rights gives you confidence when advocating for yourself.

- **European Union law**: Directive 2000/78/EC establishes a general framework for equal treatment in employment, requiring reasonable accommodations for workers with disabilities.
- **National labor laws**: Each EU country (and others globally) has its own protections against discrimination and requirements for inclusive workplaces.
- **United Nations CRPD (Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities)**: Recognizes the right of people with disabilities to work on an equal basis with others, including access to accommodations.
- **ILO guidelines**: Promote workplace inclusion through accessible recruitment, flexible work practices, and vocational support.

Practical supports:

- University disability or career offices can provide documentation and coaching.
- HR departments often have diversity officers who can arrange accommodations confidentially.
- Organisations such as the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights **(FRA)** and **Neurodiversity Hub** offer resources on rights and workplace strategies.

9.4 Expressing Boundaries and Needs

Advocacy is not only about disclosure – it is also about setting boundaries. Without clear boundaries, students often risk burnout, overstimulation, or confusion about expectations.

Boundaries in practice:

- **Time**: "I can attend meetings until 3 p.m., but I need focused time afterward to complete reports."
- **Workload**: "Before I take on new tasks, I need to finish the current project."
- **Sensory needs**: "Strong fragrances make it difficult for me to concentrate – could we keep shared spaces fragrance-free?"

Tips for effective boundary setting:

- Use **"I statements"**: "I work best when…" instead of "You always…"
- Stay brief and clear; avoid over-explaining.
- Confirm agreements in writing when possible.
- Be polite but assertive – boundaries are necessary for sustainable work.

Example script**:** "I want to give my best at work, and to do that, I need clear instructions and some quiet time during the day. Would it be possible to arrange that?"

Research by Clouder et al. (2020) highlights that neurodivergent employees thrive in workplaces where they can openly set boundaries without fear of stigma.

9.5 Building Confidence in Self-Advocacy

Self-advocacy is a skill, and like any skill it improves with practice. Many students feel nervous at first, but confidence grows over time.

Steps to build confidence:

- **Start small**: Practice with low-stakes requests, like asking for written agendas.
- **Use role-play**: Rehearse conversations with mentors, friends, or university staff.
- **Seek allies**: Identify colleagues or HR staff who can support your requests.
- **Track progress**: Keep a simple record of what worked and what didn't.
- **Reflect and adapt**: Treat self-advocacy as a learning process, not a one-time event.
- **Celebrate successes**: Each positive step strengthens your skills and resilience.

External resources:

- **Mind (UK)**: Guides on self-advocacy for people with mental health needs.
- **Autistica (UK)**: Resources on disclosure for autistic employees.
- **Neurodiversity Hub (EU/global)**: Practical tools for students entering work.

9.6 Practical Tips and Scripts for Everyday Advocacy

- "I find it easier to focus when I receive instructions in writing. Could we do that after meetings?"
- "I work best with regular check-ins. Would a 10-minute weekly meeting be possible?"
- "I can complete this project well if I have an extra day to review details carefully."
- "I need to take short breaks every few hours. This helps me stay productive."

These kinds of short, respectful statements make advocacy concrete and easier to practice.

Conclusions

Advocating for yourself is one of the most important skills you can bring into the workplace. It allows you to communicate your needs clearly, use your rights, and create a supportive environment where you can thrive.

Remember:

- Disclosure is your choice and can be partial or full.
- Accommodations are normal, often simple, and protected by law.
- Boundaries protect your health and performance.
- Self-advocacy is a skill you will develop over time.

By learning to advocate for yourself, you not only strengthen your own career but also contribute to building more inclusive workplaces for everyone.

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CHAPTER 10: REAL-LIFE SUCCESS STORIES – HOW NEURODIVERGENT STUDENTS HAVE THRIVED

Introduction

Starting work or even an internship can feel both exciting and stressful. Questions may come to mind*: What if I am not good enough? What if my challenges get in the way? How will colleagues react if I need adjustments?* Such thoughts are common, and many students have felt the same.

The good news is that there are many encouraging examples showing how neurodivergent people have found jobs where their abilities and ways of working were not only accepted but valued.

These stories show that differences can be the very thing that makes someone especially valuable. It is not about a diagnosis, but about the skills, perspectives, and persistence you bring with you.

Success does not always mean a perfect career without difficulties. In many stories, students describe how they faced obstacles but managed to move forward step by step. What matters is not avoiding challenges, but learning how to use your strengths and ask for the support you need.

10.1 Strengths that workplaces value

Workplaces appreciate abilities such as accuracy, creativity, resilience, empathy, and reliability. These strengths are often linked to neurodivergence or life experience.

- Accuracy and attention to detail (ASD)
- Creativity and high energy (ADHD)
- Empathy and strong listening skills (trauma background)
- Persistence and reliability (e.g. dyslexia, Tourette's, OCD, epilepsy)

These qualities are highly appreciated in many fields, and they can open doors to jobs where such abilities are not only useful but essential.

Employers also highlight honesty, straightforwardness, and consistency as valuable traits. Many neurodivergent employees are seen as reliable and trustworthy, which makes them respected and appreciated team members.

10.2 Examples of success in different fields

Real-life experiences show how different strengths can match different roles in the workplace. These examples highlight how unique abilities become assets when the environment is supportive.

ICT and Software Development

An autistic student created an e-learning solution during their studies, which led to a permanent position in software development. They thrived in work where they could focus deeply on one task, supported by clear instructions and a calm environment. The employer noticed that their precision significantly improved software quality.

Marketing and Creative Ideation

A student with ADHD completed an internship at a marketing agency. They excelled at rapid idea generation and brought fresh perspectives that were turned into real campaigns. The workplace was a good fit because quick thinking and creativity were valued, and flexible ways of working were allowed.

Customer Service and Healthcare

A student with a trauma background began a placement in healthcare. They built strong trust with patients through empathy and calm interaction. The workplace supported them with mentoring and time to get comfortable, which created a safe environment and allowed their strengths to shine.

Creative Industries

A student with dyslexia worked in graphic design. They relied on visual thinking to create innovative solutions, and the team recognized that their way of seeing the bigger picture brought new creativity and boldness to projects. The workplace encouraged them to use visual tools rather than relying heavily on text.

Security Sector

In one case, a security guard succeeded because they noticed details others missed. Their tasks were clearly defined, and the team valued them as a reliable member, which strengthened their confidence and performance.

Software Company Hiring Autistic Employees

An international software company has recruited autistic employees for software testing and quality assurance. These employees stood out in spotting small errors and working systematically. The company adjusted its hiring process so candidates could demonstrate skills through practical tasks rather than traditional interviews, and it created a calm work environment. As a result, the work became meaningful and rewarding for the employees.

Banking and Data Processing

A European bank hired neurodivergent employees to process large amounts of numerical data. Their ability to focus for long periods made them especially well-suited for this task. The workplace added quiet rooms and clear processes, which supported their success.

Visual Design and Art

In the arts and design field, employees with dyslexia brought new perspectives to visual problem-solving. Their way of processing information through images led to innovative outcomes that clients appreciated. The workplace supported this by allowing them to work visually without pressure to rely on text.

Social and Health Care

In social and health care, employees with trauma backgrounds built deep, empathetic connections with clients. The teams gave them time to build trust and offered support in emotionally demanding situations, which allowed their strengths to flourish.

In many of these cases, success was made possible by small adjustments such as flexible schedules, written instructions, or access to quiet spaces. These changes did not cost much but made a big difference for confidence and performance.

10.3 What can be learned from these stories?

The success stories make one thing clear: neurodiversity is not a limitation but a strength. Many students did not succeed because everything was easy, but because workplaces made small and practical adjustments that opened the door to their abilities. Clearer instructions, flexible schedules, a quieter office, or the presence of a supportive mentor were often enough to create the conditions for growth.

There is no single “best job” for autistic, ADHD, or trauma-affected individuals. What works well for one person may not be helpful for another. Success comes from finding a good match between your personal strengths and the way the job is organized. This means career paths are highly individual – and that is completely normal.

Another clear lesson is that inclusion benefits everyone. Practices such as visual instructions, clear routines, and quiet spaces make work easier not only for neurodivergent employees but for all colleagues. Asking for these practices is not asking for “special treatment” – it is helping to create improvements that strengthen the whole workplace.

Finally, success does not usually begin with a perfect first job. Many students started with internships, part-time roles, or short trial periods. These opportunities allowed them to demonstrate strengths, gain confidence, and learn what environments suited them. Over time, these steps often developed into lasting employment.

Conclusions

The most important message is this: you do not need to be perfect to succeed. Workplaces need many kinds of people, and your strengths are valuable.

Remember that success is a journey. It often begins with small steps – an internship, a first job, or a short trial – and grows stronger over time. Each step helps you build confidence and discover the kind of workplace where you thrive.

Remember this: neurodiversity is not only a challenge but also a resource. Many employers value exactly the qualities that make you different – and those qualities might be the key to your team's success.

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