



# INCLUSIVE INTERVIEWS

A Guide to Supporting Neurodivergent Candidates

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# Inclusive Interviews: A Guide to Supporting Neurodivergent Candidates

## Introduction

Neurodiversity refers to the natural variations in how people’s brains work, including those with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and other neurological differences. Neurodivergent individuals bring unique perspectives, talents, and problem-solving skills to the workplace. However, traditional hiring processes can inadvertently create barriers for neurodivergent candidates, making it difficult for them to fully showcase their abilities.

This guide aims to help employers create a supportive and inclusive interview process that recognises and respects the individuality of neurodivergent candidates, ensuring fair opportunities for all. Building an inclusive interview process isn’t just the right thing to do—it’s also a smart investment. By recognising and respecting the individual needs of neurodivergent candidates, employers can create a more equitable hiring process that benefits both the candidate and the organisation. Small adjustments can make a big difference, ensuring every candidate has the opportunity to shine.

## Recognising Self-Identified Neurodivergent Candidates

Not all neurodivergent individuals have an official diagnosis. Barriers such as personal preference, cost or stigma may prevent some from seeking a formal diagnosis. Employers must:

- Respect the needs of candidates who self-identify as neurodivergent.
- Avoid requiring proof or justification for accommodation requests.
- Foster a non-judgmental atmosphere where candidates feel safe disclosing their needs.

## The Importance of Individuality

It’s critical to move away from a “one-size-fits-all” approach to interviews. Neurodivergence is not a monolith—what works for one person may not work for another. Employers should embrace the following principles:

1. **Avoid Assumptions:** Don't make assumptions about a candidate's abilities or preferences based on their diagnosis or disclosure.
2. **Ask, Don't Guess:** Give candidates an opportunity to share their specific needs or accommodations.
3. **Focus on the Person, Not the Label:** See the candidate as a whole individual, beyond their neurodivergence.

Remember, inclusivity is about treating every candidate as a unique individual with their own skills, strengths, and challenges.

## Adopting a Strengths-Based Approach

Neurodivergent candidates often bring unique strengths that can enrich an organisation, such as:

- **Innovation and creativity:** Creative problem-solving and fresh perspectives.
- **Attention to detail:** Spotting patterns or errors that others may miss.
- **Ethical and honest communication:** Neurodivergent individuals often communicate with honesty and directness, avoiding unnecessary ambiguity or hidden agendas.
- **Focus:** The ability to deeply immerse in specific tasks or projects.
- **Resilience:** Adapting to challenges and demonstrating high levels of commitment.
- **Pattern recognition and analytical thinking:** Some neurodivergent thinkers have an exceptional ability to identify patterns, trends, or connections.
- **Strong memory and recall:** For some neurodivergent individuals, long-term memory and recall are notable strengths.
- **Expertise and special interests:** Many neurodivergent employees have deep expertise in niche areas or special interests which makes them highly knowledgeable and skilled in their chosen fields.
- **Commitment to quality:** Neurodivergent individuals often demonstrate a strong commitment to producing high-quality work.

Employers should adopt a strengths-based approach, focusing on how candidates' unique skills align with the role rather than perceived limitations.

## Understanding Neurodivergent Needs

Every neurodivergent person is unique, and their needs and preferences can vary widely. While there is no one-size-fits-all approach, understanding common challenges and needs can help employers create a more inclusive environment.

### **Sensory Sensitivities**

Bright lights, loud environments, or strong scents can overwhelm some individuals. Sensory discomfort may distract or distress candidates during interviews. To mitigate this:

- Provide a quiet, well-lit space with adjustable or natural lighting where possible.
- Minimise background noise or allow candidates to wear noise-cancelling headphones if practical.
- Ensure the space is scent-free or communicate any environmental factors in advance.

### **Processing Time**

Some neurodivergent individuals may require additional time to process questions and formulate their responses. Rapid-fire questioning or expecting immediate answers may disadvantage these candidates. Employers can:

- Share interview questions in advance or outline the types of questions they can expect.
- Allow pauses after asking a question and avoid interrupting as they gather their thoughts.
- Encourage candidates to ask for clarification or request a question to be rephrased.

### **Regulatory Measures**

Many neurodivergent individuals find it challenging to regulate sensory or emotional responses in high-pressure settings like interviews. Providing opportunities for self-regulation can make a significant difference:

- Offer scheduled breaks during the interview for candidates to reset.
- Create a low-pressure environment by expressing understanding and flexibility.
- Allow candidates to use items like fidget tools or suggest seating preferences to support focus.

## Communication Styles

Neurodivergent candidates may prefer direct, clear, and unambiguous communication. Social conventions like small talk or reliance on nonverbal cues can be challenging for some. To support different communication styles:

- Phrase questions clearly and concisely, avoiding abstract or ambiguous language.
- Avoid over-emphasising social behaviours like eye contact or body language when evaluating responses.
- Let candidates know it's fine to take time or ask for clarification.

## Predictability

Uncertainty can be a significant source of stress for neurodivergent candidates. Knowing what to expect can help them feel more comfortable and confident. To enhance predictability:

- Provide a detailed agenda or schedule for the interview, including length, format, and participants.
- Clearly outline what candidates need to prepare or bring.
- Share the types of questions or tasks they might encounter, such as hypothetical scenarios or practical exercises.

## Creating an Inclusive Interview Process

### 1. Preparation

- Share clear details about the interview process, including format, who will be in attendance, length, and assessment criteria.
- Include a section in the invitation where candidates can confidentially request adjustments.
- Offer flexibility in scheduling, allowing candidates to choose times that suit their needs.
- Invite candidates to ask any additional questions they might have about the interview in whatever format (such as an email request or zoom or phone meeting) that they are most comfortable with.
- If it is not possible or appropriate to meet a candidate's request, clearly explain prior to the interview why this accommodation or adjustment cannot be made.

## **2. Adjusting the Environment**

- Provide a calm, distraction-free space for in-person interviews.
- Ensure minimal distractions, such as busy backgrounds, for online interviews.
- Limit sensory triggers, such as loud noises or bright lights.
- Ensure the space is accessible for candidates with physical or sensory needs.
- Ask the candidate what specific sensory needs they have (and remember, not all neurodivergent people have sensory processing differences) and accommodate those needs as far as possible.

## **3. Flexible Assessment Methods**

- Offer alternatives to traditional interviews, such as practical exercises, written responses, or portfolio reviews.
- Focus on assessing skills and potential rather than social behaviours or verbal fluency.
- Provide instructions in multiple formats (e.g., written and verbal).
- Avoid timed tests, unless completely essential.
- Provide additional time for candidates to complete assessments and answer questions.

## **4. During the Interview**

- Use structured, straightforward questions that are clear and easy to understand (you will find examples of how to ask questions in an accessible manner towards the end of this guide).
- Be patient, allowing candidates time to process and respond.
- Encourage candidates to ask for clarification or take breaks as needed.

## **5. Post-Interview Support**

- Inform the candidate when they can expect to hear about the outcome of the interview.
- Provide timely and constructive feedback to all candidates and ask them how they would prefer to receive this feedback (eg: in written form or phone call).
- Ask for feedback on the interview process to identify areas for improvement.
- Keep communication open and transparent, ensuring candidates feel respected regardless of the outcome.

## Bias Awareness

Bias awareness when interviewing neurodivergent candidates means recognising that your own assumptions or expectations might unfairly influence how you view a candidate. For example, a neurodivergent person might not make eye contact, take longer to respond, or communicate in a direct way—and that's okay. These differences don't reflect their skills or ability to do the job.

As the interviewer, it's about focusing on what really matters: the candidate's strengths, experience, and potential, rather than judging based on how they communicate or behave compared to neurotypical norms. By being open-minded and aware of these biases, you can ensure you're giving every candidate a fair chance to shine.

Employers should:

- Provide training on recognising and addressing biases.
- Use standardised interview questions to ensure consistency.
- Include diverse hiring panels to reduce individual biases.

## The Benefits of Inclusive Practices

By creating a supportive interview process, employers can tap into the talents of a highly skilled and often underrepresented group. Inclusive hiring practices also enhance the organisation's reputation, foster workplace diversity, and demonstrate a commitment to equity.



## Neurodivergent Communication Differences: A Brief Overview

A job interview is an opportunity for you to communicate to a candidate what the role entails and how the organisation operates. It's also a chance for the candidate to communicate to you why they are the best person for the role, and for your organisation. Neurodivergent individuals often have unique communication styles that reflect diverse ways of thinking and processing information. These alternative approaches to interaction can make it difficult for neurodivergent people to demonstrate their experience, skills and qualities, particularly in a pressurised environment such as an interview setting. Recognising the differences that neurodivergent people may face regarding communication and adapting the types of questions you ask, and how you ask them, in addition to opening up the possibility of moving away from verbal communication, allows candidates to clearly demonstrate their ability for the role. Here are some key aspects of neurodivergent communication:

- **Directness and Honesty:** Many neurodivergent individuals communicate in a straightforward and honest manner, prioritising clarity over social conventions or implied meanings. This may sometimes be perceived as "blunt," but it often stems from a desire to be transparent and avoid miscommunication.
- **Nonverbal Communication:** Eye contact, facial expressions, or gestures may be used differently or less frequently by neurodivergent individuals. For example, some autistic people may find eye contact distracting or uncomfortable, even when they are actively engaged in the conversation.
- **Processing Time:** Some neurodivergent individuals may need more time to process spoken language or formulate responses, especially in high-pressure or fast-paced settings. Allowing space for pauses and reflection can help facilitate clearer and more thoughtful communication.
- **Preference for Literal Language:** Neurodivergent individuals, particularly those with autism, may interpret language literally. They might find idioms, sarcasm, or metaphors confusing unless explained. Using clear, direct language helps avoid misunderstandings.
- **Tendency to Give Detailed Information:** Many neurodivergent individuals have a strong preference for sharing detailed information. They may elaborate extensively on a topic, providing context, facts, or insights that they feel are important. This can be valuable but may sometimes come across as "talking at length" to others who are less detail-oriented.
- **Going Off on Tangents:** Enthusiasm or deep interest in certain topics may lead some neurodivergent individuals to go off on tangents during conversations. While this can seem unrelated, it is often a reflection of their passion or how their brain connects ideas. Gentle redirection can help refocus discussions if needed, while still appreciating their input.

- **Social Cues and Nuances:** Picking up on unspoken social cues, body language, or implied expectations may be more challenging for some neurodivergent individuals. They often benefit from clear, explicit communication about what is expected in social or professional contexts.
- **Emotional Expression:** The way emotions are expressed can differ. For example, someone may appear “flat” or overly expressive compared to societal norms. These differences in tone or body language can sometimes lead to misunderstandings about their feelings or intent.

## How to Support Neurodivergent Communication

- **Be Patient and Open:** Allow time for individuals to process and respond without rushing or interrupting.
- **Provide Clarity:** Use direct, clear language, and avoid relying on idioms, sarcasm, or implied meanings.
- **Value Details:** Recognise the value of detailed explanations and redirect respectfully if the conversation becomes too lengthy or tangential.
- **Avoid Assumptions:** Don't make assumptions based on communication style; instead, ask clarifying questions if needed.
- **Respect Nonverbal Differences:** Understand that behaviours like reduced eye contact or atypical body language don't reflect disinterest or disengagement.
- **Provide Feedback:** If the candidate has not fully answered the question, explain to them clearly what you would like them to focus on.

## Examples of alternative questions that recognise neurodivergent communication patterns

### 1. Multi-layered or Overly Complex Question

**Difficult:**

*Can you tell me about a time when you had to manage conflicting priorities, explain how you navigated the situation, and describe the outcome?*

**Alternative (break the question down into individual questions which the candidate can answer and which lead to the next question):**

*Can you describe one situation where you had multiple tasks or priorities to handle?*

**Follow-on question:** *What steps did you take to manage them?*

**Follow-on question:** *What was the result?*

**Why the Alternative is Better:**

Breaking the question into smaller parts makes it easier for the candidate to process and respond, while reducing the cognitive burden of juggling multiple elements.

### 2. Hypothetical or Abstract Question

**Difficult:**

*"How would you handle a situation where a team member disagrees with your approach to a project?"*

**Alternative:**

*"Have you worked on a project where someone had a different approach or opinion?"*

**Follow-on question:** *How did you communicate or resolve the difference?"*

**Why the Alternative is Better:**

The rephrased question draws from real experience, making it more concrete and less reliant on imagining hypothetical situations, which can feel overwhelming or unclear.

### 3. Open-Ended, Vague Question

**Difficult:**

*What are your greatest strengths?*

**Alternative:**

*Can you tell me about one or two skills you're most confident in?*

**Follow-on question:** *How have you used those skills in your previous roles?*

**Why the Alternative is Better:**

The alternative focuses the question, offering a clear starting point and guiding the candidate to provide examples.

#### **4. Behavioural Question with Unclear Expectations**

**Difficult:**

*Tell me about a time you took initiative at work.*

**Alternative:**

*Can you share an example of a task or project where you noticed something needed to be done, and you acted on it?*

**Follow-on question:** *What steps did you take?*

**Why the Alternative is Better:**

The clearer framing of the alternative reduces ambiguity and specifies what kind of situation the interviewer is asking about.

#### **5. Abstract Question About Self-Reflection**

**Difficult:**

*How do you define success in your role?*

**Alternative:**

*In your previous roles, what was something you achieved that made you feel proud or satisfied?*

**Follow-on question:** *What made it feel successful to you?*

**Why the Alternative is Better:**

The alternative provides a concrete anchor (previous roles and achievements) rather than leaving the candidate to formulate a broad definition.

## 6. Social Interaction Focused Question

**Difficult:**

*How do you build rapport with team members?*

**Alternative:**

*Can you describe a time you worked with a team?*

**Follow-on question:** *What did you do to collaborate effectively with others?*

**Why the Alternative is Better:**

It avoids subjective language like "rapport" and focuses on tangible examples of teamwork, making it more practical and less abstract.

## 7. High-Pressure "On-the-Spot" Problem Solving Question

**Difficult:**

*How would you improve our company's current product or service?*

**Alternative:**

*Have you noticed anything about our product/service that you think works well?*

**Follow-on question:** *Can you describe what you've noticed?*

*Have you noticed anything about our product/service that you think could be improved?*

**Follow-on question:** *Can you tell me what you think could be improved?*

**Why the Alternative is Better:**

The alternative removes the pressure of offering a perfect or groundbreaking idea while inviting constructive feedback in a more relaxed, approachable way.

## Conclusion

Creating an interview environment which is accessible for neurodivergent employees allows you to select the best candidate for the role, by ensuring that all candidates are on an equal playing field.

For information about neurodiversity training in the workplace, ensuring that interviews are structured in a way that recognise the needs of neurodivergent people, please email: [info@autism-assessment-online.com](mailto:info@autism-assessment-online.com)