

ATKINS

Member of the SNC-Lavalin Group



NeuroCyber

NeuroUnity

Many minds, one mission

SUMMARY REPORT APRIL 2023

A RESEARCH INVESTIGATION SEEKING TO UNCOVER THE BARRIERS
AND ENABLERS THAT NEURODIVERGENT PROFESSIONALS
FACE THROUGHOUT THE EMPLOYEE LIFECYCLE MODEL.



PREFACE

The cyber sector is, and has always been, in need of different ways of thinking. Knowledge and desire to realise the benefits of neurodivergent talent in the sector is increasing, yet persistent barriers have led to continued inequality and stagnation of opportunity that profoundly affects neurodivergent professionals.

There remains a disconnect between organisational or sectoral need and those who think differently; a contradiction between knowing there is a need, but not adapting to achieve it. Without action, talent possessed by neurodivergent colleagues remains hidden within organisations, is misunderstood, or overlooked. Those individuals with aptitude and potential who are looking for cyber careers can find it difficult to access, or are unaware of, employment opportunities, training and upskilling that help to build skills to enter the cyber security sector. A picture familiar to many, but not all. There are organisations, groups and initiatives leading the way, that work hard to achieve and maintain the right culture, environment, leadership and structure to enable everyone to achieve their potential.

Atkins, supported by NeuroCyber, have undertaken the NeuroUnity Research Project to record and understand the real-life experiences of neurodivergent professionals at all stages of the employment lifecycle.

The study has focussed initially on experiences across recruitment, onboarding, daily life, development, and separation. It is understood that to sustain opportunity in the sector, we must look beyond “in-work” to ensure equitable pathways exist from linear and non-linear routes throughout early years, education and academia.

With great thanks to the participants, we have identified good practice from which to build on alongside barriers and challenges faced by many of the cyber workforce who identify as neurodivergent. This summary report looks at tangible and meaningful ways to enact positive change, underwritten by its research findings. A forward-looking stimulus that aims to lead the change towards a more equitable landscape for us all.



Mike Spain
CEO, NeuroCyber & Head of Futures, Atkins

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FOREWORDS

We all want to live in a world where a fulfilling working life is a possibility for everyone, making the best use of people's abilities to benefit us all. With a massive skills shortage and adversaries who are embracing innovation to achieve their goals, cyber security has as much to gain from enabling neurodivergent talent to thrive as any field, perhaps more. There has never been a better time for us to gain from the different perspectives that neurodivergence brings.

We have recently seen progress in understanding and talking about neurodiversity, with more business leaders being open about their neurodivergence, showing that it has not prevented them from pursuing their dreams. On the contrary, it's clear that the opposite is true: their neurodivergence played a key part in that success. It's great to have exemplars of success but their experience is not typical. Many find that achieving their goals in a world, or industry, designed around neurotypical structure is prohibitive and exhausting.

We now have a vocabulary to discuss neurodiversity and we have made some progress in changing attitudes but there is a lot still to do in working towards equity. This work is a vital next step in making cyber security accessible as a career bursting with opportunity for neurodivergent people. In analysing experiences and barriers, it breaks the problem down into smaller pieces which we can tackle. It has been clear for a while that this would be complex. We need to make changes to the working environment and to the information technology and other tools which we use to achieve an equitable platform for neurodivergent professionals to be able to work effectively.

Most important of all though, we all need to better understand the barriers and challenges that impact neurodivergent people's experiences through the employment lifecycle and work collaboratively as a sector, neurotypical and neurodivergent, to remove those barriers.

It is clear that as a sector, there is still much we must do, but this study has identified concrete steps we can take to make real progress including better ways of managing different skills and opportunity, training, establishing support and advisory roles, agreeing standards, and developing tools and information resources. Please read on and think how you can help us build on this work so that the cyber security workforce of the future can be proud of the way it understands and celebrates neurodivergence, helping to create a more equitable and secure world for all and a fairer, more inclusive society.



Dr Ian Buffey
CISO, SNC-Lavalin

I've volunteered for NeuroCyber on and off for a few years, serving on their advisory board at one time, offering advice at others. As time has gone on two things became obvious: when NeuroCyber was created it was with the aim to support neurodiversity in the workplace, but almost everything we knew was anecdotal; and what NeuroCyber was, above all, was a point of connection where neurodivergent people were sharing their stories.

The NeuroUnity study has provided the platform to ask our community for those stories - anonymously, but officially and on the record - to give us some of the data needed to start working on the broader aim of improving equity. The findings show how much knowledge is on offer in the neurodivergent community. It's a new pathway, for those of us who choose, to share our experiences. It has provided knowledge that should be used to help employers reshape their processes to be more flexible for all needs, enabling more people who want to work achieve genuine sustainable job opportunities with clear pathways for progression.

Neurodivergent people don't live in a silo, and although I think the empirical evidence NeuroUnity has been able to offer will help catalyse some genuinely impactful employment innovations, I was struck by the number of experiences and recommendations that would be beneficial to all.

Sometimes it takes an improved understanding of outlying experiences to shine light on the everyday discomforts that we all accept. Having worked with a few organisations often named for their accessibility, it's their focus on every employee being allowed to be human more than resource that produces those supportive environments identified by NeuroUnity as an enabler.

Whilst the NeuroUnity research offers recommendations to support greater diversity in organisations, my connection to the project will always be personal. I'm looking forward to hearing more stories of welcoming workplaces, passionate technologists, and job promotions; and I'm looking forward to the power that representation has to support greater numbers of young people into their chosen professions.



Dr Emma Osborn
Director OCSRC Ltd

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We would like to thank all our participants for their involvement in the survey. We are incredibly grateful for the depth and quality of answers given and the insight these have provided. We would also like to thank the following people:

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Cyber Security Consultant, Atkins

BEN NEENAN

Managing Consultant, Atkins

NEUROUNITY BACKGROUND AND AIM

The benefits of a diverse team are well documented, and well publicised; we know diverse teams are more effective, innovative, and productive. Part of this diversity includes having a team that possesses differing neurotypes, neurodivergent and neurotypical alike.

Neurodivergent refers to an individual who acts, behaves, and learns in a different way compared to those who are neurotypical; it includes neurotypes such as ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), Autism, Dyslexia, Dyspraxia, Dyscalculia and Dysgraphia.¹ The term neurotypical references 'normal ways of thinking' according to the perceived standard our society has set. The term neurodiversity was coined by Australian Sociologist, Judy Singer, and centres upon the huge variation and differentiation between human cognitive functioning and refers to the notion that there is no singular correct way of acting, learning and behaving.²

Organisations have become increasingly interested in seeking to increase neurodivergent talent within their workforce and enhance inclusivity of neurological differences. Whilst this has represented a positive step towards increasing awareness and understanding, barriers to and within employment for neurodivergent professionals are still persistently cited in research across academia, government, and industry and span the entire employee lifecycle. There are organisations which implement exemplar inclusive practices designed for neurodivergent applicants, and professionals. For example: SAP, Microsoft, EY, and JPMorgan Chase³ & Co, e2e Assure and IASME⁴ are employers who are well known for implementing sustainable work programmes for autistic individuals. However, these organisations seem to constitute the exception rather than the rule, with the majority of those listed being consistently cited in equality, diversity, and inclusion (ED&I) themed reports.

While the importance of increasing neurodivergent talent, both to the individual and organisation, is widely recognised amongst organisations, the required equitable processes and practices that enable the achievement of an equitable workplace are not being widely implemented. This is further illustrated by statistics that demonstrate the number of autistic individuals who want to work⁵, and the corresponding low unemployment rates.⁶ This indicates that whilst progressive steps are being made towards equity, more needs to be done.

In a move towards continually developing equity and inclusivity at work, organisations can and must seek to further their cognisance on the specific challenges, barriers, and enablers that neurodivergent professionals face when seeking and in employment through a socially responsible approach. This centres on the proactive differentiation between: (1) the creation of socially responsible programmes; and (2) basing recruitment of neurodivergent professionals solely on the perception that diversity of thought benefits the organisation, i.e., a tick-box exercise. While the former benefits both the individual and the organisation in a move towards embracing inclusion⁷, the latter focuses solely on the benefit to the organisation and does not foster a sense of belonging. Consequently, this will enable and inform a much clearer understanding of both the barriers and enablers that can either, respectively, deter or contribute to employment outcomes within a neurodivergent professional's working life, and will play a crucial role in further contributing to career longevity and the corresponding positive impacts on mental health, wellbeing, and quality of life.

NeuroUnity aims to uncover and explore the known and unknown barriers and enablers that are faced by neurodivergent professionals across the employee lifecycle model.

This has been achieved through an experience led approach, based upon a sample of neurodivergent professionals, to identify where misalignment exists and help identify best practices for the workplace.

This Summary Report is intended to act as a 'snapshot' of the Full Report, titled "NeuroUnity, Many Minds One Mission". The focus of this snapshot is to demonstrate the barriers and enablers associated with the employee lifecycle model as reported by our survey participants, and to highlight our recommendations based upon these findings.

The NeuroUnity Summary and Full Reports represent a step towards achieving equity; however, achieving equity also requires support and backing from academia, government, and industry. Therefore, it is hoped that NeuroUnity's findings and recommendations, based on the lived and current experiences of neurodivergent professionals across numerous sectors, will incite action to create lasting change.





RESEARCH METHOD

The NeuroUnity Summary Report is based on the responses received from an online anonymous survey conducted from September – October 2022.

The research approach was informed by an initial desktop-based mapping exercise of the current landscape, alongside a review of grey literature centred on the subject of neurodivergence in the workplace. Additionally, consultation sessions were conducted with industry experts on the known barriers and enablers across the employee lifecycle model for neurodivergent professionals.

The survey structure and question-set were aligned to the processes and aspects of the employee lifecycle model stages. Participants were asked qualitative and quantitative questions on their demographics and their experiences associated with these stages. Questions were centred on both known and unknown barriers, and enablers that can contribute towards employment outcomes for neurodivergent professionals. The survey required participants to self-report their neurodivergences through selection from a pre-determined list or through utilising the free-text option if a neurotype was not listed.

A pilot study was performed with an internal network affinity group in Atkins to ensure that the language adopted was accurate, the method of data collection was suitable, and that the content was correctly aligned to the aim of the research. Participants were sourced through survey advertisement on varying social media platforms, the NeuroCyber network, known network affinity groups within the Cyber Security Sector, and snowball sampling methods.

The survey received a total of 202 participant responses.



REPORT LIMITATIONS

It is acknowledged that the research approach and the NeuroUnity, Many Minds One Mission Report carry certain limitations. One of these limitations is associated with the survey. It is recognised that the data collection instrument of an online survey was not accessible for all, meaning that the reach of the survey was limited to those with online access. This approach likely precluded some neurodivergent professionals from participating in the research investigation. This may have impacted the number of survey responses – the survey received responses from 202 neurodivergent professionals, which is a relatively small sample size.

The number and profile of participants is also a limiting factor. In some cases, the participants' demographics were weighted towards a particular profile, e.g., 91% of participants are White, as shown by figure 3 on the following page. The effect of this is further impacted by the method of sourcing survey participants, which centred on utilising the NeuroCyber network, meaning that a large proportion of participants work within the Cyber Security Sector, as shown by figure 6 on the following page. The survey and participant limitations mean that the data does not represent a fully diverse range of experiences of neurodivergence and may not be reflective of idiosyncrasies, barriers or enablers associated with other industry sectors. This is explored in more detail in the Full Report.

Another limitation is associated with the way in which the survey data has been analysed. The data was not analysed at the neurotype categorisation level and has instead been presented as collective experiences of the participants. It is acknowledged that no experience of neurodivergence is alike and that there are specific barriers and enablers associated with a particular neurodivergence. However, the collective approach applied is considered to be consistent with the intention that the recommendations have a broad positive impact, i.e., that they beneficially impact all in tackling the barriers experienced by neurodivergent professionals across the employment lifecycle.

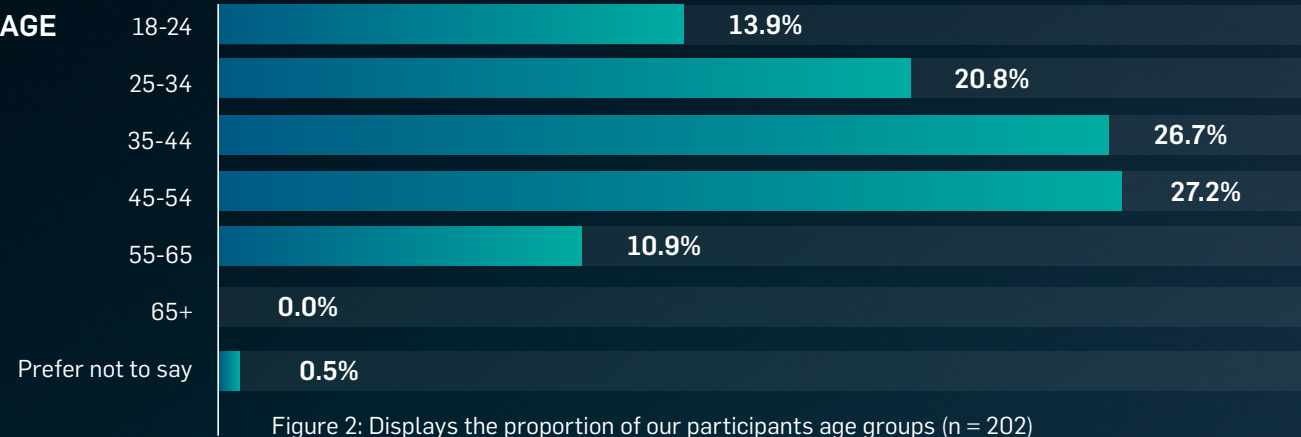
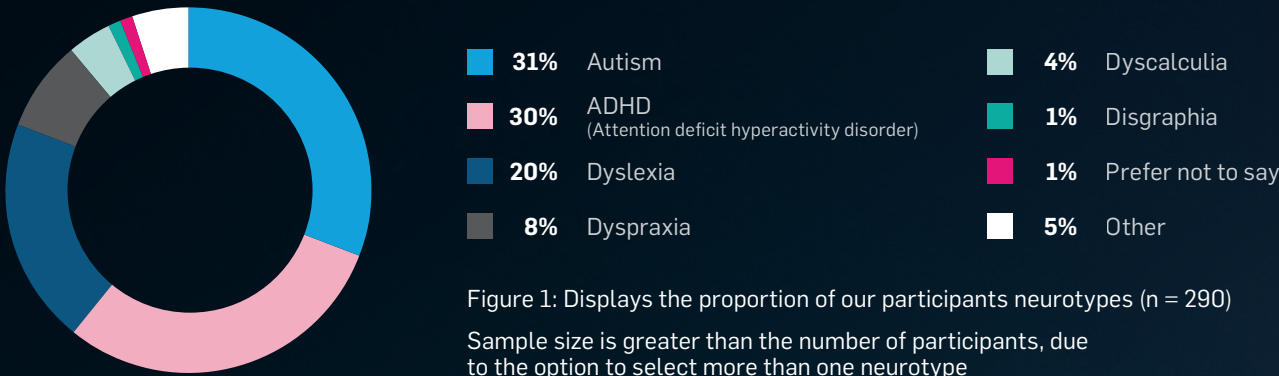
NeuroUnity understands the importance of language, and recognise that during the data collection, our terminology used at times was incorrect. For example, when asking participants what 'challenges' they faced during a particular employee lifecycle stage, when in fact this should have been 'barriers'. We are committed to continually improving and increasing our knowledge and in line with this, we have updated the wording within the report to rectify this.

DEMOGRAPHICS

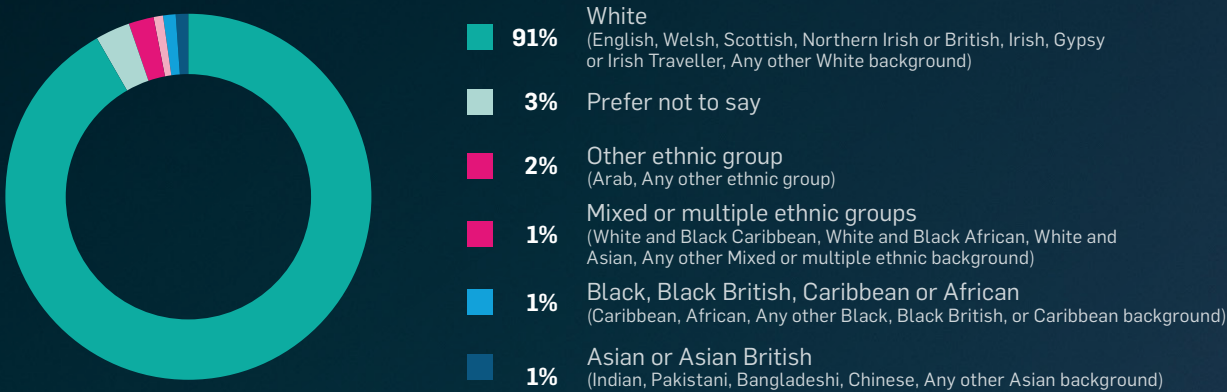
The survey received responses from 202 participants.

A full breakdown of these results will be presented in our full report, "NeuroUnity, Many Minds One Mission".

NEURODIVERGENCES RECORDED



ETHNICITY



GENDER

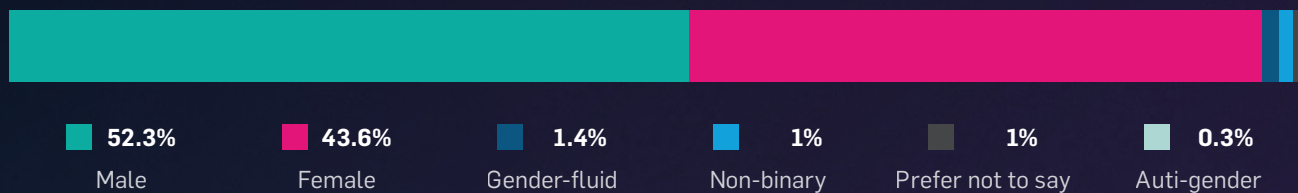


Figure 4: Displays the proportion of our participants gender identity (n = 202)

SEXUAL ORIENTATION

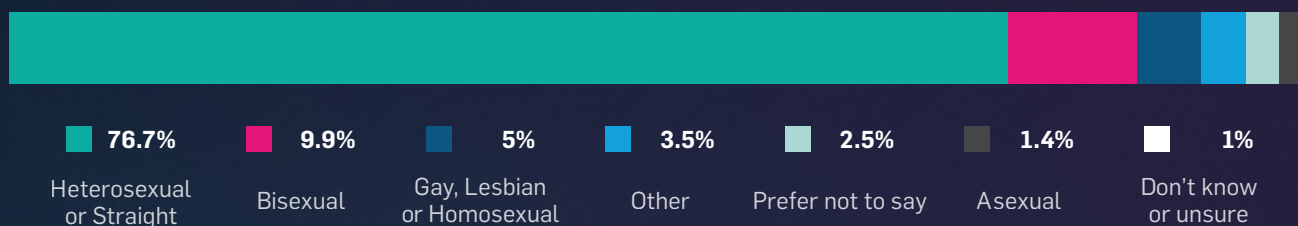


Figure 5: Displays the proportion of our participants gender identity (n = 202)

WORKING IN CYBER SECURITY



Figure 6: Displays the proportion of participants who work in Cyber Security (n = 202)

RESULTS

THE RECRUITMENT STAGE

The recruitment stage is centred upon the processes and experiences of how an individual goes through the journey of initially sourcing and applying for a role, to gaining employment.

Traditionally, the recruitment process and assessments conducted within, have been designed to achieve mutual alignment between an individual's aims and expectations and, those of the organisation. To determine alignment, organisations adopt differing assessment techniques as a means to measure perceived suitability but equally provide the applicant with the opportunity to gain insight into the company and its corresponding values, culture, and ways of working. Whilst recruitment practices and processes are deemed to be well-established through their widespread adoption amongst most organisations, the same perhaps cannot be said for well-established equitable recruitment processes.

For example, this lack of establishment is in part represented by the apparent disconnect between the number of autistic individuals who want to work⁸ and the low employment rates.⁹ Suggesting that inequitable hiring and recruitment processes may act as one of the first barriers to neurodivergent individuals gaining employment. This inaccessibility may be rooted, intentionally or unintentionally, in traditional recruitment practices and processes, which tend to be focused on and designed around neurotypical individuals.

NeuroUnity asked participants what challenges and enablers they had faced within the recruitment process, the results are presented on the following page.



BARRIERS, AS DOCUMENTED BY OUR PARTICIPANTS (n = 95)	ENABLERS, AS DOCUMENTED BY OUR PARTICIPANTS (n = 105)
<p>Assessment Activities, Interviews – Approximately 11% of participants reported that interviews, were an activity that induced feelings of stress and anxiety, with additional barriers listed that were associated with interpreting interviewer questions and answering questions under pressure.</p>	<p>Employer Communication – Approximately 19% of participants reported that frequent and timely communication, including quick response times to questions, clear points of contact, and clear contacts for queries centred on reasonable adjustments, contributed towards positive experiences.</p>
<p>Assessment Activities, Time – Approximately 9% of participants reported that the amount of time given for completion of assessment activities presented barriers. This included not enough time to read material, challenges associated with committing competency-based examples to memory, and a lack of time to respond to questions asked during the interview.</p>	<p>Provision of Reasonable Adjustments – Approximately 18% of participants reported that receiving reasonable adjustments, such as extra time during assessments activities, and gaining assessment materials, such as interview questions in advance, contributed towards positive experiences during the recruitment process.</p>
<p>Lack of Reasonable Adjustments – Approximately 6% of participants reported instances whereby reasonable adjustments were not offered or received when requested, or there was a sense of uncomfortableness when requesting reasonable adjustments, which put participants off asking.</p>	<p>Welcoming Environment – Approximately 15% of participants reported that the interviewer's friendliness, and other positive attributes of interviewers, hiring managers and wider staff members contributed towards creating a welcoming environment.</p>
<div data-cbox="262 414 326 455">“</div> <p>“Interviews are difficult, particularly when they diverge from expected questions.”</p> <p>“I’ve never felt able to raise a request for my needs to be accommodated.”</p> <p>“I struggled with answering technical questions as I wasn’t given enough time to digest what the questions were actually asking me.”</p>	<div data-cbox="671 414 735 455">“</div> <p>“Allowed for extra time to complete problem solving and technical activities. Allowed me to complete these activities in a separate room on my own.”</p> <p>“The organisation I recently joined did a fantastic job of keeping me updated on the current status of my application and was very clear about next steps.”</p> <p>“They were friendly, approachable, and invited me for a site visit after I was offered the job to get a feel for the workplace.”</p>

The Path Towards Equitable Recruitment Practices

Looking to the barriers reported by our participants, we can learn that specific activities pertaining to the recruitment and assessment process can present barriers to neurodivergent applicants. The barriers however, tend to be fully within the control of hiring organisations, but beyond the control of the individual applying. The inequity stemming from these barriers may be rooted, intentionally or unintentionally, in traditional recruitment practices and processes that tend to be focused on and designed around neurotypical individuals.

However, through looking into the enablers reported by our participants, and integrating wider equitable measures, barriers can be removed. For example, employing consistent and clear communication that is unambiguous, providing points of contact surrounding reasonable adjustments, ensuring that hiring staff have an awareness of neurodivergence, and adopting a flexible, welcoming, and friendly approach to recruitment activities, will be an affirmative step that may positively influence a neurodivergent individual's decision to disclose their condition, diagnosis or needs.

RESULTS

THE ONBOARDING STAGE

The onboarding stage is centred upon the processes associated with integrating new professionals into an organisation, familiarising them with their role and responsibilities, their team, and the organisation's culture.

Effective onboarding strategies and corresponding processes can lead to increased employee engagement, reduced employee turnover, act as an extension of the positive candidate experience and reduce the time it takes for the new employee to become proficient in their new role. Ineffective employee onboarding is cited as a potential reason as to why 36% of individuals leave their new jobs within the first month.¹⁰

In order to be effective, onboarding processes and corresponding socialisation processes must ensure that they do not, intentionally or unintentionally, encourage or result in the minimisation or loss of distinguishable and unique characteristics of an individual's personality and identity.

While it is important for new professionals to be aligned to the organisation's ethos, organisations can run the risk of exerting pressure on new professionals to assimilate into the organisation's majority status surrounding values, norms, and culture¹¹, which could detrimentally impact neurodivergent professionals. This risk stems from the frequent endorsement of social and networking activities associated with the onboarding stage. The emphasis placed on such activities may result in neurodivergent employees experiencing higher levels of masking given the stigmatisation and discrimination associated with the misunderstanding of some neurodivergent traits.

NeuroUnity asked participants what challenges and enablers they had faced within the onboarding process, the results are on the following page.



BARRIERS, AS DOCUMENTED BY OUR PARTICIPANTS (n = 97)	ENABLERS, AS DOCUMENTED BY OUR PARTICIPANTS (n = 105)
<p>Role Expectations – Approximately 24% of participants reported that their roles, and the associated responsibilities of the role at times were unclear. There were also instances where participants had to increase effort to maintain the expected level of output, resulting in them working beyond their contracted hours.</p>	<p>Welcoming Environment – Approximately 37% of participants reported that supportive management, welcoming team members, and a friendly atmosphere contributed towards positive experiences.</p>
<p>Disorientation and Isolation – Approximately 13% of participants reported feelings of disorientation, isolation and loneliness when being onboarded.</p>	<p>Induction Programme – Approximately 13% of participants reported that well organised, supportive, and thorough onboarding processes contributed towards a positive onboarding experience.</p>
<p>Social Barriers – Approximately 8% of participants reported barriers associated with workplace socialisation activities during onboarding, and in some instances, the corresponding unspoken expectations associated with the workplace.</p>	<p>Mentors and Buddies – Approximately 12% of participants reported that being provided with a mentor or ‘buddy’ made them feel supported during the onboarding process.</p>
<div> <div>“</div> <div>“</div> </div>	
<p>“Not getting support with interpreting social dynamics and acquiring responsibilities around stakeholder management.”</p> <p>“When I started here, I was completely isolated, left to get on with it and then after six months told I was rubbish anyway.”</p> <p>“No clear and precise explanation of my role and leaving me to work out what it was. Expecting me to memorise large amounts of information without writing it down.”</p>	<p>“Yes - I was welcomed into a lovely friendly team.”</p> <p>“Provided a ‘buddy’; a longer-term employee in the same location and work path who I could contact for unofficial assistance and to orient me to the office culture and basics of the job.”</p> <p>“I was provided with a very clear training pathway both using online learning and learning on teams with members of my team over the course of a month. This meant that the flow of incoming knowledge was great, and I got to meet every team member one-on-one.”</p>

The Path Towards Equitable Onboarding Practices

Looking into the barriers reported by our participants, onboarding activities may be mis-aligned to neurodivergent wants and needs, and effort should be afforded to reviewing the process for flexibility, adaptability, and appropriateness. Accordingly, the onboarding process needs to be a central consideration for employers as it shapes the new employee's initial impression of the organisation's culture and processes, which is reflected in the recognition that it is a process which should not be considered as one-size-fits-all and should be tailored to individual need.

The process should enable all new starters to access the people they need; understand the processes they require and feel welcomed and supported into the organisation, which is confirmed by the enablers reported by our participants experiences. For example, measures to integrate can include, establishing a formal support network (comprised of team members, buddies, mentors, and line managers), clearly communicating expectations surrounding the role and its corresponding responsibilities, and ensuring that new employees have a say in defining what socialisation or icebreaking activities they are comfortable with.

RESULTS

THE DAILY LIFE STAGE

The daily life stage encompasses professionals’ everyday working lives and extends to the environment in which roles and responsibilities are conducted.

Whilst effective recruitment and onboarding practices may exist, they do not ensure successful employment longevity and subsequent success in employment. As such, it is important to recognise and understand the barriers that can persist for neurodivergent professionals in the workplace; for example, there are indications that autistic individuals who are working, experience an absence of reasonable adjustments¹², and lack of understanding and support.¹³

Understanding and recognising the influence that the working environment can have upon an individual’s wellbeing, productivity, and overall job satisfaction carries significant importance.

All individuals should have access to an inclusive physical and/or virtual working environment, or at least have the opportunity to create an inclusive space within their work environment where this is not immediately available within their organisation. Yet, a non-inclusive working environment is known to act as a barrier for neurodivergent individuals in achieving a successful and rewarding career, reinforcing the idea that work environments are typically tailored towards neurotypical individuals. Understanding the way in which individuals interact and collaborate in a variety of working environments is central to ensuring that all individuals feel included within the workplace and to providing equal opportunity for all to perform to the best of their ability at work.

NeuroUnity asked participants what challenges and enablers they had faced within their daily lives at work, the results are presented below.

BARRIERS, AS DOCUMENTED BY OUR PARTICIPANTS (n = 99)	ENABLERS, AS DOCUMENTED BY OUR PARTICIPANTS (n = 117)
Difficulties in Delivery of Work – Approximately 31% of participants reported difficulties in the delivery of work stemming from their working environment, which was inadequately designed to accommodate differing needs. Additionally, barriers to conducting work were presented through noisy working environments in open office plans, bright lighting, and a lack of dedicated desks.	Flexible Working – Approximately 21% of participants reported advantages of remote working, such as greater control over desired ways of working.
Stress, Anxiety, Burnout & Depression – Approximately 16% of participants reported stress, anxiety, burnout, and depression during their daily working lives. At times, participants attributed this to specific aspects of their working environment and their needs not being met.	Supportive Environment – Approximately 16% of participants reported the importance and role that colleagues played in their working lives, particularly when creating an open and friendly environment, which contributed towards the formation of clear communication channels.
Neurodivergence Traits – Approximately 6% of participants reported that aspects associated with their neurodivergence made it difficult to complete parts of their role.	Reasonable Adjustments – Approximately 9% of participants reported the benefits of receiving reasonable adjustments within their working lives.



"I often can't focus or get started on work. Or I end up hyper focused and working very long hours without a break. In turn either frustrating me or burning me out."

"The constant anxiety about not putting myself out there enough, and often forcing myself against my own will to be more social than I am and rub elbows."

"No quiet zones (or ability to play music over headphones in the office) means less ability to get into my focus zone and so takes me longer to achieve the same amount of work on detailed work. Being interrupted during focused work can be very disruptive and we used to have signs (approachable or not) [...]."



"Very focussed on flexible working and work/life balance, which means I am able to structure my working day in a way that works well for me."

"Plenty of schemes if I need access to them, many helplines and safe spaces."

"Made sure I feel comfortable discussing my ADHD, made sure I knew that adjustments can be made and if people are not accommodating of my requests that I will be supported in asking for changes (i.e., respecting focus time and lunch/working hours as these are important for me to limit my impairment from executive dysfunction)."

The Path Towards Equitable Daily Life Practices

Looking into the barriers and enablers reported by our participants, maintaining rewarding and fulfilling employment is important for the wellbeing of all professionals and should not be the preserve of neurotypical professionals, however this can only be achieved if neurodivergent professionals are in a working environment that understands and welcomes difference and caters to needs through the equity of integrated practices.

For example, as remote and hybrid working are increasingly popular and becoming a common work practice during and following the COVID-19 pandemic, having the option to work from home or having greater control over one's working preferences and environment, contributes towards greater workplace accessibility for neurodivergent professionals.

However, this will have to be balanced with the varying stressors that can be associated with remote operation and technologies used to facilitate remote working; responding flexibly to adjustment requests and pro-active, regular check-ins with those working outside of the office can help to alleviate some of these stressors, whilst also supporting interaction, personal organisation, and communication.

When working within offices, organisations should engage with neurodivergent professionals to better understand triggers associated with sensory processing and the effects of over/under stimulation, to provide positive actions such as mitigation equipment (e.g., headphones or earplugs) and provide "sensory safe zones" where professionals can spend time to recover or de-stress.

RESULTS

THE DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRESSION STAGE

The development and progression stage centres on the process of advancing a career and enabling clear progression opportunities through defined and accessible pathways. It is often synonymous with increasing experience, skills, responsibilities, and financial reward.

While organisations develop activities intended to support career progression and development for their workforce, for example through mentoring, training, defined career pathways, defined training pathways and transparent promotion processes, organisations must seek to determine if these processes form part of an inclusive, equitable approach for all employees. Career development and performance management, including progression, benefit both the organisation and its professionals.

From the organisational perspective, they are linked to improving the quality of employment for the long-term success of organisations.¹⁴ From the employee perspective, career development and retention are strongly interconnected; for example, career development is associated with career longevity and employment outlook for autistic professionals.¹⁵ A lack of career development and progression is one of the top reasons why professionals are leaving their jobs in the post-pandemic period.¹⁶

NeuroUnity asked participants what challenges and enablers they had faced within their development and progression at work, the results are presented below.

BARRIERS, AS DOCUMENTED BY OUR PARTICIPANTS (n = 95)	ENABLERS, AS DOCUMENTED BY OUR PARTICIPANTS (n = 87)
Lack of progression and promotion – Approximately 23% of participants reported that they had experienced a lack of progression and promotion during their career development.	Training - Approximately 21% of participants reported that accessible, available, and inclusive training enabled them to have a positive experience. This ranged from training for softer skills to more technical, specialist training.
Neurotypical constitution – Approximately 19% of participants reported that they had been impeded in progression or development during their careers due to the reliance by the organisation upon neurotypically orientated criteria. For example: progression being synonymous with acquiring managerial responsibilities that outweigh specialisms or other contributions, alongside rigid competency frameworks do not account for differences outside those which are deemed to fall within the brackets of neurotypical.	Supportive communication – Approximately 15% of participants highlighted regular, open communication with line managers was beneficial.
Poor management – Approximately 7% of participants reported that they had experienced poor management associated with their development and progression. This ranged from a lack of planning surrounding progression to expectations not being articulated, due to a lack of communication.	Progression planning – Approximately 10% of participants reported that activities surrounding progression, such as goal setting and objective alignment to progression enabled them to have a positive experience.



“Lack of progression as not the typical model of the Leader in our organisation.”

“I feel I am asked too often to plan for a progression that isn’t going to take place.”

“No meaningful progression outside a rigid competency framework that’s designed by and for neurotypical people, and is antithetical to ‘spiky profiles’.”



“Listened when I’ve said I’m struggling, listened when I give feedback.”

“Provided opportunity and support in career progression.”

“Training is open to all at all levels so we can continuously learn which means I can access training that suits me for the job I’m doing when I need it in a way that suits me. Training managers on better communication and inclusion has helped.”

The Path Towards Equitable Development and Progression Practices

Looking into the barriers and enablers reported by our participants, and given the known wide range of learning styles and preferences, training and delivery methods should be made available to professionals in ways that best support different learning profiles. Inclusive training design must be adopted and should include contribution and review from neurodivergent individuals or groups.

Additionally, organisations and managers should also seek to use effective and appropriate communication methods, e.g., non-direct and electronically mediated forms of intra-organisational communication such as e-mails, instant messaging, chatbots, online communicators, or online platforms to support neurodivergent professionals in their development and progression at work. Not only does this promote the formation of more balanced and considered messaging, but it can also result in the communication process itself being less stressful for neurodivergent professionals as it is more understandable, legible, easier to measure, and does not require an immediate verbal response.

This approach to communication should extend to specific career conversations, and actions surrounding progression planning that enable clear visibility as to what the process and corresponding expectations look like for the employee and employer, particularly as a lack of the prior was raised by our participants as a barrier to development within the workplace.

Organisations should seek to clearly outline expectations and challenge and broaden typical competency frameworks centred on ‘what good looks like’ to encompass differing employee profiles and career pathways.

RESULTS

THE SEPARATION STAGE

The separation stage, which is also known as the offboarding process, centres on when an employee leaves an organisation.

When an individual decides to leave a position of employment, there are many varying factors at play. Push and pull factors play a key role in the decision to leave, whether it is voluntary or involuntary. Push factors are rooted in aspects that motivate an employee to move away from their current role. Pull factors are motivating influences that attract an employee to move to a new employer or role. For example, a more inclusive environment or greater compensation. An effective offboarding process helps an organisation to understand where there is room for improvement in the employee experience, whilst disengaging an employee from their position. Doing so, creates more effective and strategic processes to help improve employee retention rates.

However, where organisations and managers fail to recognise the impact exclusive or biased practises can have on neurodivergent employees that can contribute towards 'push' factors, as indicated by the increase in employment tribunals, which have risen from 70 in 2020 to 93 in 2021.¹⁷

NeuroUnity asked participants what challenges and enablers they had faced when leaving an organisation, the results are presented below.

BARRIERS, AS DOCUMENTED BY OUR PARTICIPANTS (n = 71)	ENABLERS, AS DOCUMENTED BY OUR PARTICIPANTS (n = 61)
None – Approximately 42% of participants reported that they didn't experience any challenges or barriers when leaving a role.	Exit Interview – Approximately 18% of participants reported that having an exit interview enabled them to provide feedback and explain the reason as to why they were leaving the organisation.
Bad Management – Approximately 18% of participants reported barriers associated with employers or managers responses to the initiation of separation. Bad management also played a contributing role when pushing participants to leave a role, or employer.	Supportive – Approximately 13% of participants reported instances where they found their organisations to be supportive for their reasonings for leaving and recognised the values and contributions that the employee had made.
Discrimination – Approximately 7% of participants experienced counts of discrimination which contributed directly towards participants leaving a role. These experiences of unacceptable push factors were experienced across the lifecycle and lead to instigation of separation, not necessarily experienced during the separation process itself.	Leaving Event – Approximately 10% of participants reported that having a well organised and inclusive event with individual need taken into consideration, such as a team meal out, contributed towards a positive experience.



“Once I handed in my notice I was treated as a traitor by the management. Even though I followed all the processes they went out of their way to make life difficult [..].”

“It was seen as a negative to be dyslexic with my previous employer, even though there were a high percentage of staff that were. It was seen, that ‘give them a job’ but ‘do not promote’, leave that to the ‘normal folk’.”



“Conducted an open-minded exit interview.”

“Although I find social situations a bit awkward, it’s also a rewarding experience to have some kind of informal event to mark the end of a long-term job - going out for a meal together, getting a leaving card, that kind of thing.”

“When leaving a previous position, the entire company (it was a small one) made it clear that I had been a valued member of the team, and that I would be missed. As well, my manager gave me some excellent advice, as I was going to be moving into my first leadership role.”

The Path Towards Equitable Separation Practices

Looking into the barriers and enablers reported by our participants and aligning reasons for leaving an organisation with ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors can enable organisations and employers to better understand what they should and should not be doing in order to fully support their neurodivergent professionals and increase retention. One way in which organisations can gain this understanding and achieve this alignment is through exit interviews, which highlight how the departing employee perceives the organisation they are leaving.

Exit interview practices and policies depend on multiple factors, including company size and industry. Nevertheless, companies should have a formal policy regarding exit interviewing, which applies to all leavers, but is applied flexibly depending on the voluntary or involuntary nature of the departure. Due to the sensitive nature of the discussion, policy, processes, and procedures surrounding exit interviewing should allow for consideration of individual needs and provision of associated support.

This could include providing interview questions in advance, determining the preferred method of conducting the interview (e.g., online surveys or questionnaires can be used as an alternative to the traditional interviewing format), and ensuring interviewers are suitably trained. Therefore, exit interviews are typically conducted by HR professionals as they possess prior knowledge about the leaver’s job profile, performance, organisational compliance, discrepancies and other job-related variables from the employee’s manager and the organisational monitoring systems/metrics.

When conducted effectively, exit interviews can provide organisations with invaluable insight into their enabling and restrictive practices, allowing them to better understand what they should or should not be doing to increase retention. It is imperative that organisations act on lessons learned from the process that could highlight opportunities for improvement across the lifecycle.



RECOMMENDATIONS

STANDARD

Barrier – Neurodivergent professionals seeking employment or in employment have no common or verified way in which to gain the objective assurance of an organisation's neuro-inclusive credentials, claims, and culture.

Solution – Development of an auditable, certified standard for neurodivergent equity best practice in organisations.

It is recommended that a standard be developed, in partnership with a national body, that can be applied by all organisations no matter the size, sector, or location. The standard should centre on the provision of requirements, corresponding guidance, and defined controls associated with the implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of focused neurodivergent ED&I programmes.

There are organisations which currently provide maturity assessments, consultancy, and certifications to companies looking to further their ED&I programmes and culture. This service can make an impactful difference to companies through the provision of advice and guidance, programme design and planning, benchmarking, and the experience required to put an effective programme together.

From a neurodivergent perspective, evidence that an organisation is actively pursuing a path of improvement and maturity is a strong positive factor when assessing employment options. However, not only can it be difficult to ascertain whether the certification signifies that neurodivergent equity forms a central part of an organisation's ethos, but there are also barriers surrounding the authenticity and legitimacy of certifications. This can make distinguishing between companies, from an ED&I perspective, difficult.

An auditable and impartial standard would provide much-needed assurance, enabling prospective and current neurodivergent professionals to be able to effectively evaluate an organisation on the authenticity of credentials, claims, and culture surrounding neuro-inclusivity. Equally, this will enable organisations to demonstrate that certification has been achieved through an auditable assurance method, which is objectively assessed and verified, and provides them with the means to demonstrate their commitment to equitable ED&I practices. Additionally, the ability to objectively measure ED&I, will enable organisations to gain an understanding as to where success is being achieved, and where further action is required.

COMPETENCY FRAMEWORK

Barrier – Neurodivergent professionals in employment are at a greater risk of experiencing a lack of progression due to rigid competency frameworks.

Solution – Competency Framework for Progression and Development.

It is recommended that in a move towards redefining what 'good' looks like, a strengths-based competency framework should be developed to support the progression of neurodivergent professionals. The framework should be one which values individual differences, embraces a flexible and adaptive approach, and is committed to understanding and supporting the needs of the individual.

The management of career progression and associated competency requirements have traditionally been based on neurotypical characteristics, often failing to account for individual differences. This detrimentally impacts neurodivergent employees who may deviate from what is the perceived preferred norm.

An organisation can create and implement an effective management and progression approach for neurodivergent professionals by recognising that differences should be valued, which ultimately benefits both the employee and organisation. One way of achieving this is through the adaptation of 'The Bundle of Sticks'¹⁸, a common legal analogy in which each 'stick' represents a certain right, which makes up part of a greater whole. Through legal processes, some 'sticks' can be removed, but the entirety of the bundle remains, and still provides rights to the individual.¹⁹ The application of this analogy to the Cyber Security Sector would enable organisations to develop and implement an equitable competency framework, aligned to the needs and wants of the individual, and wider business strategy.

Applying this analogy to the Cyber Security Sector, each 'stick' would represent a skill that falls into one of three categories, broadly defined as either personal, functional, and sector specific. These combined skills would constitute an employee's profile. It is suggested that, as in the legal parallel, 'sticks' can be removed without affecting the overall bundle. For example, 'sticks' that are traditionally considered a key requirement for progression such as managerial responsibilities may be removed or tailored if they do not align to an individual's skillset or objectives.

In the context of neurodivergence, mandating managerial experience may act as a barrier to progression due to the associated requirement for frequent and consistent social interactions with differing groups, timely organisation, and management of a team and its members. Through the removal of 'sticks' related to managerial responsibilities; this barrier is eliminated. 'Sticks' may also be tailored, added or substituted to represent strength and capability in certain areas that when combined, accurately represent a person's profile. Greater focus can be applied to more representative 'sticks' that help better reflect ability and subsequent recognition. This example does not signify or aim to suggest that neurodivergent professionals do not or cannot make excellent managers; it serves to only provide context to the proposed framework and to highlight the value of a flexible, adaptive approach that values individual differences.

The strengths-based competency framework should include and provide:

- › Clear alignment with the professionals aims and ambitions.
- › Ownership of career pathway that is informed by a strengths-based approach, in alignment to the individual, and business need, which allows organisations to inform performance management, development, reward, and recognition more effectively and fairly by re-defining what 'good' looks like alongside associated grade or level expectations.
- › Provide greater intelligence and relevance to competency profiles that employees will be able to use to better plan career pathways and access opportunities.
- › Enable organisations to better form and manage truly diverse and high-performing teams through application of an aligned requirements model to project and programme design.
- › Organisations should challenge themselves to pivot thinking from what employees "can't do" without a certain 'stick', to what support the organisation can provide an employee to succeed, or what additional competencies may be needed based on the project's profile.



NEURODIVERGENT ADVISORY ROLE

Barrier – Safe channels for disclosure of neurodivergence may not always be accessible, or immediately obvious for neurodivergent professionals, which can lead to a lack of reasonable adjustments.

Solution – Neurodivergent Support and Advisory Role

It is recommended that to alleviate the onus away from the employee in choosing whether to disclose through forced self-advocacy (as in, being solely responsible), a neurodivergent support and advisory role should be integrated into organisations, to act as an impartial supportive intermediary function.

The Neurodivergent Support and Advisory role should be a dedicated and integrated function within the organisation, assigned at the employee level and scaled dependent upon need.

The role would centre upon the following for the employee:

- › Acting as the immediate member of a wider support circle for neurodivergent professionals.
- › Working with the employee to determine needs, actionable solutions, and implementing reasonable adjustments if required.

- › Direct professionals to assessment centres, to initiate the process of a formal diagnosis if desired.
- › With the permission of the individual their advisor can advocate for them within the managerial structure by meeting with managers to discuss the implementation of support plans. A tangible document would reduce the likelihood of managers dismissing the needs of neurodivergent individuals, they would be contravening a mandatory workplace process.

The benefits would include:

- › Alleviating responsibility that might otherwise be placed upon line managers, consequently reducing the risks associated with not all staff in managerial positions having adequate training and understanding of what neurodivergence means, and the support that may be required.
- › Having these processes in place would share responsibility between the employee and businesses, the sole onus would no longer be on professionals, and they would be supported by the neurodivergent advisor.
- › Support management with any queries they may have about managing and supporting neurodivergent professionals.



COMMUNITY INFORMATION & OPPORTUNITY HUB

Barrier – There is no central hub for neurodivergent professionals to source: employment opportunities, equitable employers, and engagement with other neurodivergent professionals or groups.

Solution – Neurodivergent Community Hub

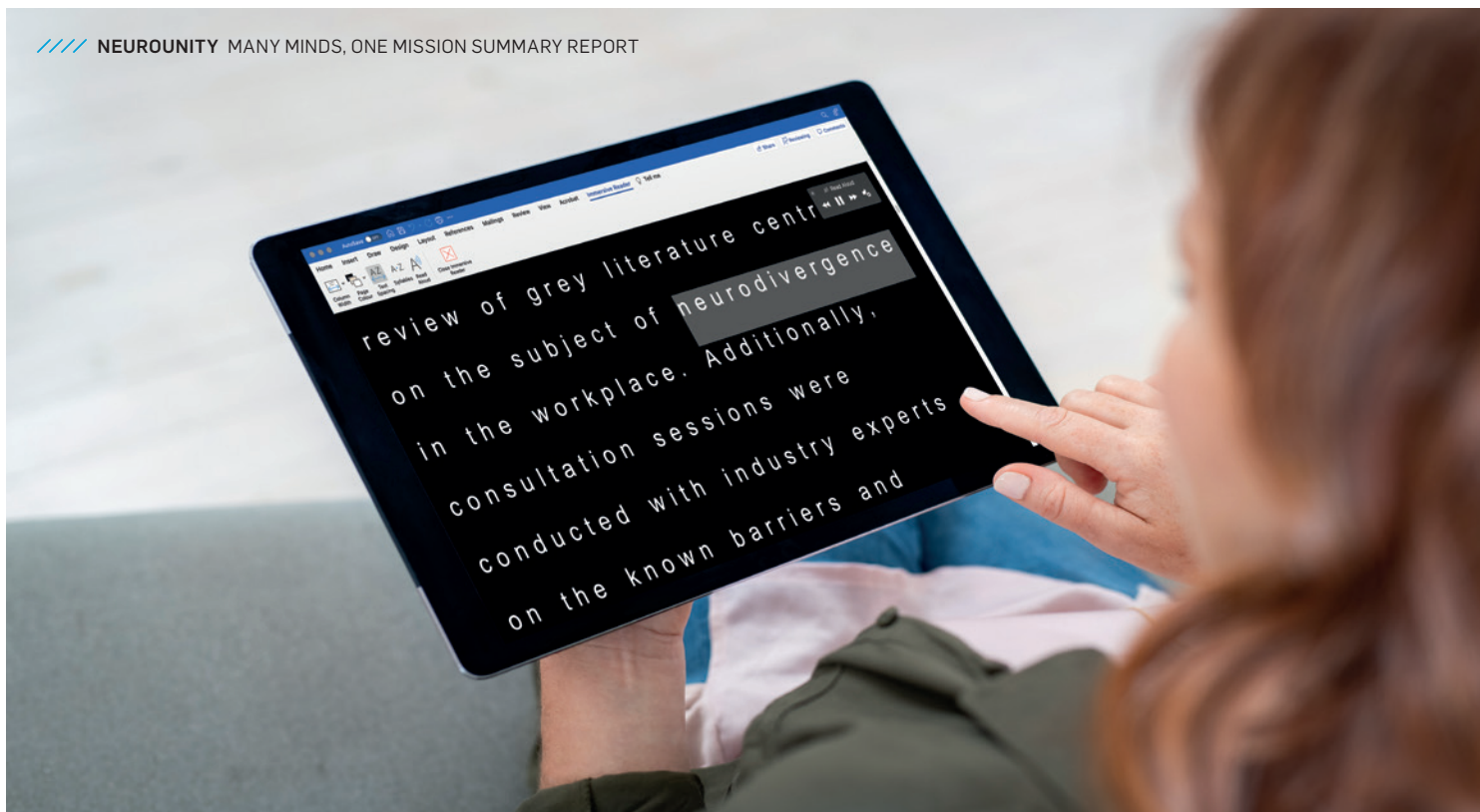
It is recommended that an online hub be developed and managed, that meets the requirements of neurodivergent people, neurodivergent groups, and organisations.

The aim is to provide a platform to be a focal point for information and opportunities across the full lifecycle from early years learning, academic opportunity and throughout the entirety of the employment lifecycle.

It will aim to address the disconnect between organisations and neurodivergent professionals but also provide guidance and visibility of pathways and opportunities for those looking to learn about cyber or enter the industry.

The functions of the hub should include:

- › Organisations will have the ability to profile their commitment to neurodivergent ED&I and interact with the user community through showcasing: employment opportunities, case studies, events, and outreach events.
- › Neurodivergent users would have the ability to assess organisational fit using multiple criteria (for example, using a map to find organisations near them, or who have certain supportive elements in place) and engage with organisations prior to instigating the recruitment phase.
- › Community formation, through providing access to relevant and current information for: equitable events, industry news, research, thought leadership, learning and skills identification and development opportunities. This information could be posted by organisations, administrators or neurodivergent individuals (upon validation).
- › Promotion and sharing of good practice and assistive material. For example, a maintained list of assistive technology, specification for neurodivergent advisory roles in organisations or inclusive management frameworks.
- › A directory of organisations who have achieved or are working towards equitable neurodivergent ED&I programmes in the workplace.
- › Geographically represented information of events, clubs, groups, and organisations with opportunities to help locate and identify those that meet regionally or locally accessible criteria.



ASSISTIVE TECHNOLOGY

Barrier – Opportunities for the provision of assistive technology to support neurodivergent professionals are being missed due to lack of visibility of products, costs, or challenges of deployment.

Solution – Assistive Technology Research Investigation

It is recommended that a research investigation be conducted to identify and evaluate the opportunity for deploying assistive technology within organisations, centred upon defined user needs and requirements.

The area of assistive technology is fast moving, with new products being developed and brought to market increasingly regularly. Whilst assistive technology can provide users with greater functionality that assists them in conducting everyday tasks associated with their job, there is a risk that there will be increasing numbers of products being designed that are untested, or unproven amongst their intended user groups. As this list of potential assistive technological solutions grows, organisations are presented with a challenge when seeking to understand which product will be the right solution and provide the greatest benefit for users.

The research scope should seek to include:

- › A product analysis, including examining functionality, availability, and costs.
- › A benefit analysis of subsequently identified products.
- › Engagement with and data collection based upon a sample group of organisations and neurodivergent professionals, to understand the barriers associated with the deployment of assistive technology, in line with previously identified products. Including, the documentation of user needs, requirements of organisations and neurodivergent professionals.

It is a further aim of the proposed research that the feasibility of a neurodivergent focussed assessment and assurance scheme be investigated where products can be reviewed against specific test criteria. An approved scheme, presented through a managed and curated list of products, would help organisations and individuals find and select those most appropriate for specific tasks or functions and help assure that the products assessed are fit for purpose. This would help identify best return on investment for user and organisation.

TRAINING

Barrier – Organisations have a lack of mandated neurodiversity training, resulting in managers, HR professionals, senior leadership, and employees having a potential lack of awareness or understanding of neurodivergence in the workplace.

Solution – Neurodiversity training programme to be deployed, tailored to role type and function, levelled for competency, and aligned to the stages of the employee lifecycle.

It is recommended that appropriate training be developed within organisations, to ensure all employees can increase their knowledge not only as to what is meant by the term neurodiversity, but of the importance of neurodivergence to the organisation.

Good practices should include:

- › Training should be in support of an ongoing programme of education rather than a once-a-year tick box exercise.
- › Organisations should consider mandating core modules to ensure all staff have reached a baseline of understanding as the means to provide more professionals with greater awareness on unconscious biases, and the barriers relating to neurodivergence that may affect their perceptions across the entire employee lifecycle.
- › Neurodivergent staff should be included in the development and delivery of content if willing to do so.
- › Where an organisation has a neurodivergent affinity group, training should be designed and assessed with either the lead or support of the group for accuracy, appropriateness, and applicability.
- › Employees will learn best through a variety of measures, so it is essential to accommodate different learning requirements across style, structure, and delivery method.



EMPOWERED AFFINITY GROUPS

Barrier – Employee neurodivergent affinity groups, can be limited in their ability to achieve and drive change in organisations.

Solution – Empowerment and enablement of neurodivergent networks and affinity groups.

It is recommended that organisations encourage and enable an employee neurodivergent network or affinity group and seek to increase the groups power in shaping and influencing business process and change across their operations. There are few better placed to raise awareness and increase knowledge across the organisation than those who are neurodivergent themselves. Organisations should engage with these groups when planning, designing, or implementing any change initiative such as training and awareness programmes and remember: “Nothing about us, without us”.

Groups can take different forms in organisations depending on objectives both of the group and the organisation. The formality of groups can vary, but given a mandate, groups can reform an organisation's culture. It should not be assumed however that membership of a group is an inevitability, for example, viewing neurodivergence as a categorisation that equates to an expectation of participation.

People should not be pressured or mandated to do so. However, a group that delivers community, influence and impact, will provide a compelling case for membership and become an important asset.

Good practices should include:

- › Groups should be member led and have a senior accountable “champion” to provide oversight and validation and help further the positive impact both in influencing organisational strategic decisions and delivering operational change.
- › Communication routes to senior management should be defined, and adhered to, enabling groups to be heard, and have a strong and consistently heard voice.
- › Communication channels should not be treated as one-way, senior leaders should listen, respond, and engage appropriately.
- › Organisations should seek to align broader ED&I programmes with groups and ensure that accountability is held at board level.



CHANGE MANAGEMENT

Barrier – Organisations, at times treat their workforce as a homogenous entity when concerning change management practices, leading to neurodivergent professionals potentially being unsupported throughout the process.

Solution – Informed change management practices.

It is recommended that organisations should seek to implement more considerate and informed change management practices for neurodivergent professionals, tailored to need and support required.

An employee's disclosure preferences and privacy surrounding their neurodivergence should be the top priority when they are changing teams, managers, or roles. There may be instances where a neurodivergent employee feels comfortable to disclose their neurodivergence to their new team or manager; however, there may be situations in which they may choose to only disclose this information to certain individuals. Therefore, creating and implementing supportive processes to enable neurodivergent professionals to have control over situations and associated choices resulting from organisational change is particularly important.

Good practices should include:

- › All changes to be communicated in a consistent, transparent, timely and accurate manner through established channels, with consideration of which channels might be best suited to the affected employee(s).
- › Consultation must be included as part of the communication, which should centre on a clear articulation of the change, what it means, and how it will impact the affected employee(s) on a day-to-day basis, with corresponding actions.
- › If required, implementing, and working to produce a plan to manage the change.



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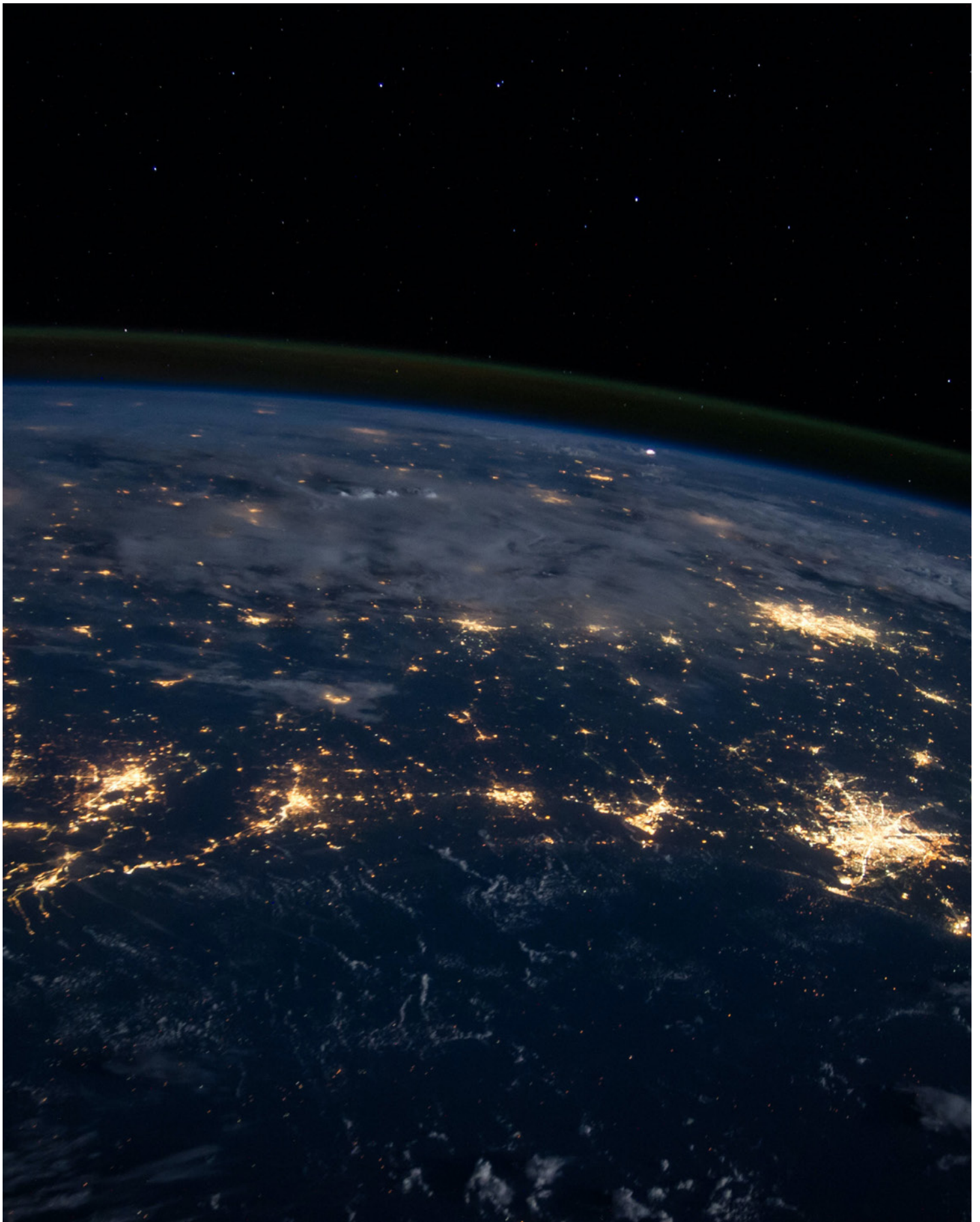
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