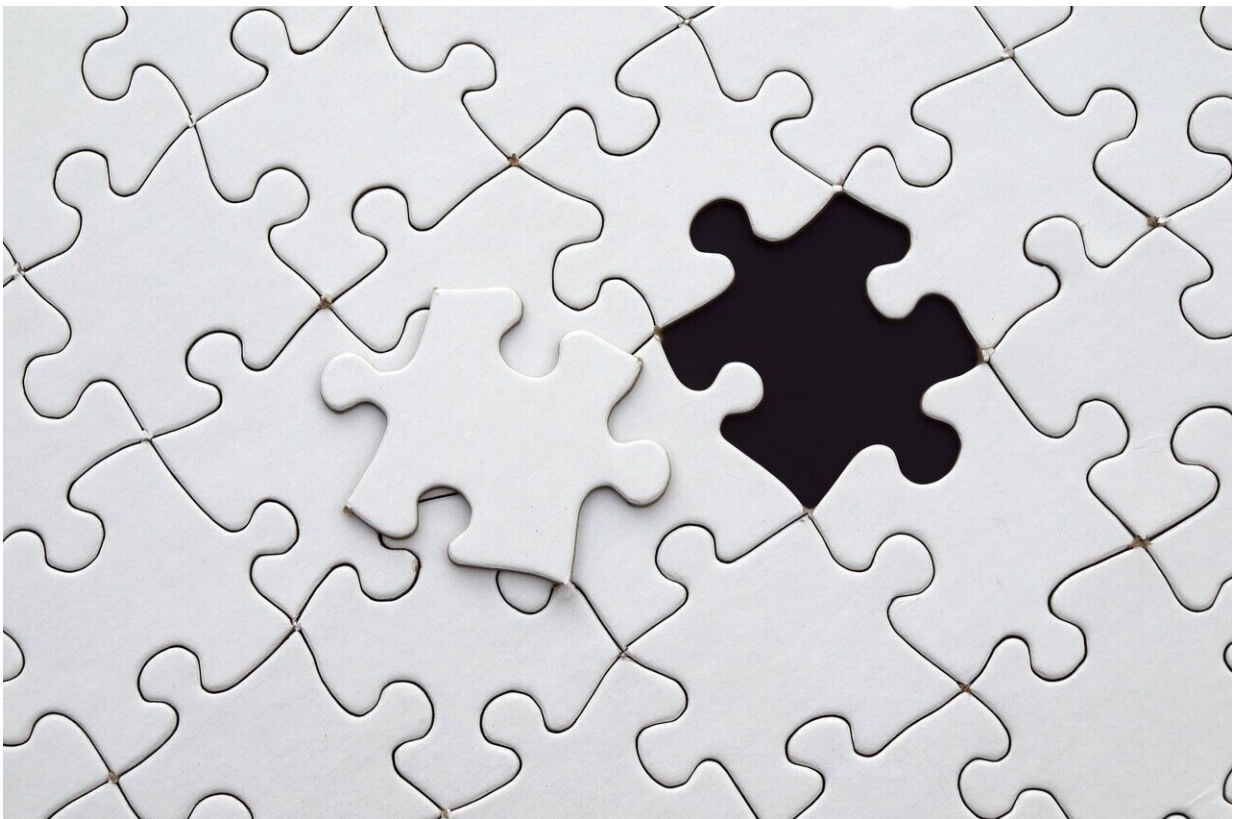


More adults are being diagnosed as neurodivergent—here's how employers can help in the workplace

April 15 2024, by Dougal Sutherland



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There has been a rise in the number of people diagnosed with "neurodivergence" in adulthood over the past decade. This trend has been noted both [internationally](#) and [in New Zealand](#). But exact rates of diagnoses in this country [are difficult to quantify](#).

As many as [8% of adults globally could have some form of neurodivergence](#).

Neurodivergence is an umbrella term that typically includes [autistic spectrum disorder](#) (ASD), [attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder](#) (ADHD) and specific learning disorders (SLD)—sometimes referred to as dyslexia.

The rise in these diagnoses when people are already in the workforce presents a challenge for employers. Business owners can be left wondering how they can support neurodivergent employees without causing issues for the wider business.

'Childhood' diagnoses now part of adulthood

Historically, diagnoses were predominantly made in children, with the view that people "grew out" of them as they developed into adults

But research over the past decade indicates the majority of people with these conditions [continue to experience symptoms throughout their adult life](#), albeit in different ways to childhood.

Understanding [neurodivergence](#) is underpinned by the view that ASD, ADHD, and SLD reflect differences in how a person's brain is "wired" rather than being an underlying "disorder".

This changing view appears to have increased awareness of neurodivergence. It has also reduced the stigma associated with it, leading more people to seek support as adults.

A limited understanding of [gender differences in the way neurodivergence is expressed](#), as well as [limited access to psychological and psychiatric assessments](#) in the [public sector](#), have likely contributed to significant numbers of people missing out on childhood diagnoses. Many are now seeking assistance in adulthood.

Neurodivergence in the workplace

This rising tide of adults seeking to better understand their differences—and potentially seek treatment—has presented [challenges for businesses and employers](#).

But employers need not fear hiring those who are neurodivergent. Viewing neurodivergence as a difference rather than a disability contributes to an [inclusive workplace](#) where people's strengths are recognized and celebrated.

Some people with ADHD, for example, work very effectively in a fast-paced environment with tight deadlines and rapidly changing content, such as journalism. People with ASD often have very specialized areas of interest that, if matched to the right work environment, [can lead them to be experts in their fields](#).

But it would be naive to say neurodivergence doesn't bring with it some challenges for individuals and their workplaces. A [person with ADHD](#) may appear quite disorganized to others (and to themselves), and at times "put their foot in their mouth" through impulsively saying something they haven't fully thought through.

Those with ASD often report challenges in navigating [social relationships](#) at work, or may have particular sensory sensitivities (finding the general hubbub of open-plan offices anxiety-provoking, for example). They may struggle to process large amounts of written or verbal information, resulting in confusion and anxiety.

Businesses need awareness

Businesses and organizations looking to support neurodivergence in the workplace should initially focus on increasing awareness and understanding among leaders and managers.

Managers need to work with individual staff who have self-identified as neurodivergent to understand and implement [what is needed to support them](#).

There may be some very practical steps that can be taken, such as having designated low-stimulus areas, providing noise-cancelling headphones, or understanding how best to communicate clearly and simply with an individual. Some staff may wish to take up psychological support via their workplace to help them develop skills in areas they find difficult.

Technically, neurodivergence is likely to fall under the [Employment Relations Act](#), which prohibits businesses from discriminating against people with these conditions. Indeed, the legislation requires an employer to make reasonable allowances in the workplace.

Perhaps the worst thing an employer can do is overlook neurodivergence as being present in the workplace. Ignorance, whether wilful or not, will lead to inaction.

That said, it would also be a mistake for an employer to unilaterally refer a staff member for an assessment of suspected neurodivergence. To

suggest someone is neurodivergent and requires a psychological assessment may lead to personal distress and potentially breach employment law.

Employers should also be aware of the [lengthy and complicated pathway](#) to an adult diagnosis, due to factors such as lack of clear adult diagnostic criteria and shortage of trained clinicians. Employers can support staff in this process by allowing flexibility in [work hours](#) to attend specialist appointments, or even funding access to assessments in the private sector.

The rise of awareness about neurodivergence mirrors the [rise in awareness](#) of mental health conditions in the workplace generally.

Although this increased visibility can be confusing for some staff and organizations, recognition and understanding of neurodivergence can only be good for businesses in the long term.

Helping people operate to their full potential by understanding their strengths and challenges will ultimately lead to thriving and productive workplaces.

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