

# CHRO Insights Series

## Report:

# Neurodiversity



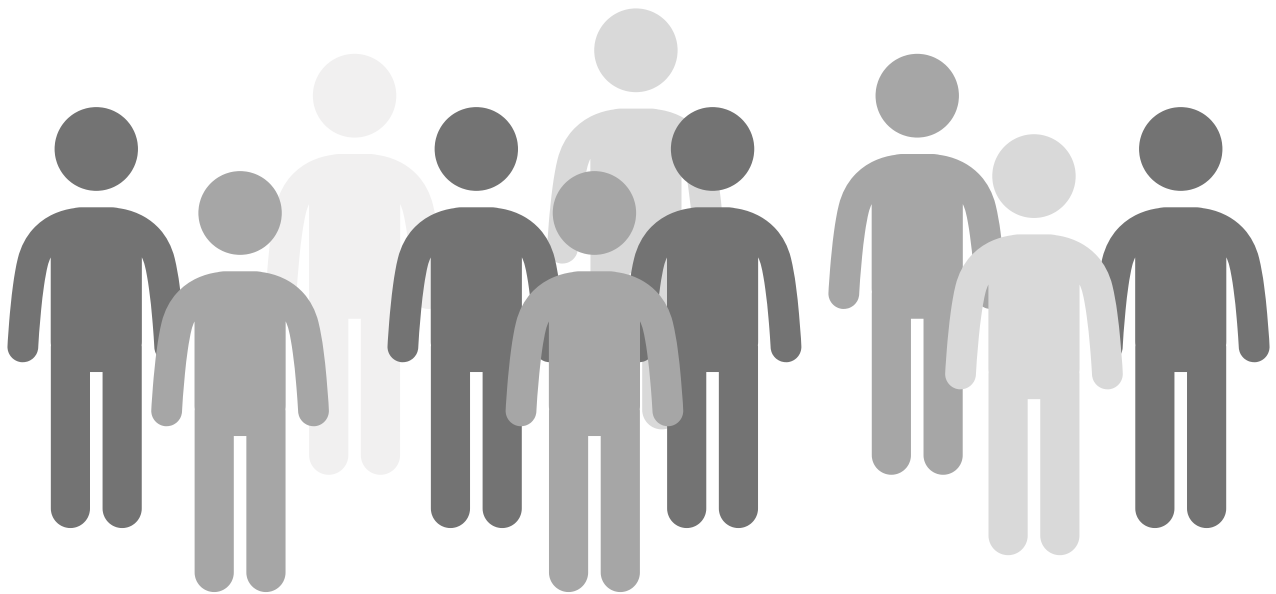
**December, 2022**



**ONE MIND™**  
**At Work**

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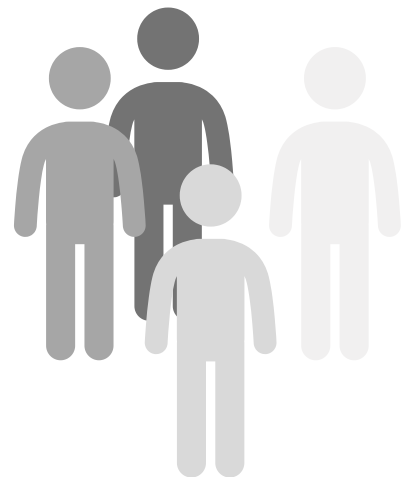
## Introduction to the One Mind at Work CHRO Insights Series

One Mind at Work is a coalition of leading employers collaborating across sectors, industries, and national boundaries to transform workplace approaches to mental health. It is part of the One Mind organization, which has a mission to accelerate collaborative research and advocacy to enable all individuals facing brain health challenges to build healthy, productive lives.

This year's CHRO Insights Series report features key learnings and best practices from leading employer and subject-matter experts on the topic of neurodiversity in the workplace. Alongside research on leading publications on the topic, experts were surveyed to create this resource for employers seeking to better understand how they can leverage a neurodiversity strategy in their organization.

The CHRO Insights Series reports are intended to motivate leaders to offer their own initiatives, using the guidance shared by peers and experts in the field, in the continuous effort to promote mental health among various businesses, sectors, and workforces.

See previous editions of the CHRO Insights Series here:  
<https://onemindatwork.org/chro-reports/>



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## Acknowledgements:

We would like to thank the following individuals and organizations for their contributions to the development of this report. Your time, insights, and guidance have been essential to the development of this resource:

- Susanne M. Bruyere, Ph.D., CRC, is a Professor of Disabilities Studies and the Director of the Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability at the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations.
- Diana Mirakaj-Finnerty is the VP and Head of USA for Specialisterne North America. Her focus in this role is on bringing inclusion to the workplace by creating employment for autistic and similarly neurodivergent.
- Jennifer Sarrett, Ph.D., is a diversity, equity, and inclusion consultant, and has years of experience in higher education and DEI work. Dr. Sarrett is an expert in anti-ableism and neurodiversity, justice reform, and qualitative research. She received a doctorate in interdisciplinary studies and earned a Masters of Education in Early Childhood Special Education.
- Nicholas Ullrich, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor of Psychology at Suffolk County Community College and a lecturer of Human Development in the Distributed Teacher and Leader Education (D-TALE) Program at Stony Brook University. Dr. Ullrich received a doctorate in Educational Psychology and a Master of Arts in Psychology.

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## Defining Neurodiversity

Neurodiversity refers to the idea that it is perfectly normal for human brains to function differently at the individual level. Heterogeneity in neurological processing is a facet of human diversity, and it creates variation in how people think, act, learn, communicate, are motivated and relate to others in society and in the workplace. If someone has never heard of neurodiversity, a core concept they should understand is that people see, think, and perceive the world differently.

Neurodivergent conditions include a range of developmental, mental health and learning disorders, the most well-known of which include dyslexia, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and autism spectrum disorder (ASD). These disorders are not rare, though the data on the specific prevalence of neurodiverse conditions is highly variable and often incomplete. For the purposes of employers, neurodiversity in a workplace setting encapsulates both individuals with a specific neurodivergent diagnosis and general neurodivergence and is not reliant on confirming that employees with specific differences and needs exist in the workplace.

Neurodivergence describes the continuum of variation that occurs in cognitive functioning. Individuals who are less neurodivergent may not recognize their neurodiversity because, despite their unique brain function, current societal structures can still meet their needs. More neurodivergent individuals may find the way society is organized to be unsupportive of their ability to thrive. While some neurodivergent individuals can navigate these systems by hiding the signs of their neurodivergence — referred to as masking, camouflaging or compensating — this is ultimately a coping mechanism that places immense pressure on their mental and physical health.

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*Neurodiversity characterizes the different ways that brains work. Looking at it as different thinking changes everything for the better.*

*Diana Mirakaj-Finnerty*

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Society has long portrayed the brain as having a single “correct” way of operating and treats any deviation from the norm as a deficit. As a result, the response to neurodiversity has often focused on fixing symptoms or helping neurodivergent individuals better fit into different spaces while disregarding the unique capabilities that individuals who think differently can bring.

In contrast, the neurodiversity paradigm encourages a new understanding that there is no single “normal” brain type. Great minds do not all think alike, and neurodiversity entails not only challenges but also important strengths. Differences in how individuals process information or communicate ideas are not “symptoms” of a neurodivergent diagnosis that needs fixing or changing.

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*A lot of the stigma we see comes from our experience with (or lack of) individuals with neurodiverse needs. We view these people as caricatures of themselves.*

*Dr. Nicholas Ullrich*

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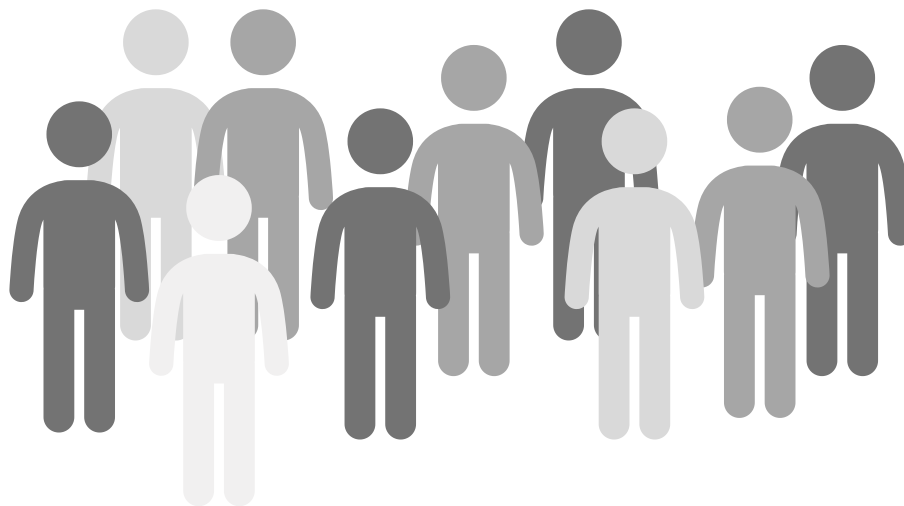
Stereotyped characteristics, such as “inattentiveness” and “limited interests,” are more commonly attributed to neurodiverse individuals, while other neurodivergent characteristics are frequently overlooked: deep focus, attention to detail, commitment to passions. A lack of eye contact is often considered a deficit in social skills because it implies a lack of attention and disinterest when others are speaking. However, neurodivergent individuals may find that direct eye contact detracts from their ability to absorb and process information.

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Experts in neurodiversity have begun to reframe these perceived deficits more accurately and positively, referring to differing abilities among neurodiverse people as “exceptionalities.”

Moreover, with the development of the social model of disability, there is a growing realization that current workplaces and ways of working only support a subset of people within them, and that many of the challenges that neurodivergent individuals face are not inherent shortcomings but rather arise from their efforts to navigate systems that were not designed for them. For instance, without the right supports in place, neurodivergent employees may struggle with changes in routines, unclear instructions or expectations, and unexpected social interactions. Rather than treating this as a deficit of the employee, there is an emerging recognition among employers of the opportunity to create more inclusive workplaces for different individual needs. Additionally, understanding the challenges neurodiverse people face in the workplace helps leaders to leverage solutions that are meaningful. Otherwise, you may have good intentions, but a poor process for uncovering and addressing the barriers that exist in your organization.

The workplace neurodiversity movement highlights that a truly inclusive workplace requires broader systemic and cultural change. It strives for a new model of people management in the future of work that accommodates diverse needs, cultivates neurological differences productively and helps all individuals thrive. Where some people use the term neurodiversity for people with a specific difference – such as ADHD, Autism, or dyslexia – it’s critical to understand that these conditions exist on a broad spectrum, and so employers need to adopt flexible and adaptive frameworks to support the truly diverse needs of their workforces.



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## Employer Best Practices for Neurodiversity

### NEURODIVERSITY AS PART OF THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

Experts in neurodiversity argue that there is both a moral case and a business case for considering neurodiversity in the workplace. The moral case may seem obvious – we are all part of the human community, and we would like to see organizations be inclusive of everyone they can from diverse communities. However, the business case for neurodiversity is equally valid. A significant motivation behind hiring neurodiverse individuals is that they can bring entirely new and revolutionary ways of thinking to organizations.

People with neurodiverse exceptionalities may come into organizations with perspectives that generate innovative solutions and strategies. Neurodiverse employees can help leaders see challenges in new ways from a fresh perspective. When employers understand and foster the exceptional skills that come from a neurodiverse workforce, they can learn how to best work with their workers.

Early examples of strategies to hire neurodiverse employees started with the tech sector, and came about because a segment of autistic individuals have characteristics of enhanced ability to focus, attention to detail, and a higher accuracy in the identification of trends in data than other people. The tech sector considered these abilities to be aligned with business goals and made a significant effort to recruit and retain talent from the autistic community. From there, the culture of neurodiverse inclusivity, including for neurodivergent individuals who are not autistic, began to gain traction.

The commitment to create an inclusive culture and hiring practice for neurodiverse individuals is a way to integrate a dedication to social good in the workplace that will make employees feel good about their employers. Present in many workforces are the parents of neurodiverse young people who are thinking about the opportunities for children and catalyzing changes in their own industries to make them more accessible.



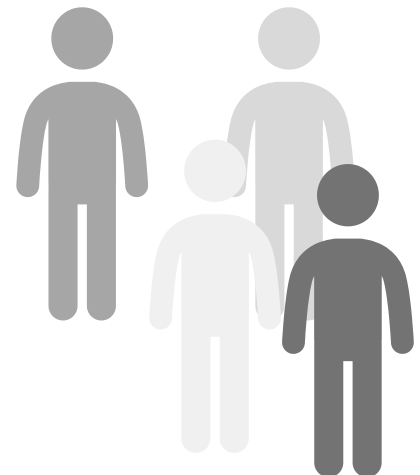
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## ADDRESS NEURODIVERSITY AT AN INDIVIDUAL EMPLOYEE LEVEL

Neurodiverse individuals are unique, even if they identify as having the same form of neurovariance, and it is critical for the success of any neurodiversity strategy to accommodate this diversity. Employers can begin by addressing the assumptions that surround neurodiverse conditions by regularly sharing the real-life experiences of people with all parts of the organization. We picture a child with ADHD tapping their foot, but not the adult whose time "got away" from them. Sharing how someone with ADHD might address time management helps to illustrate the practical realities that employers should understand.

Implementing accommodations for neurodiverse individuals is an excellent way to create inclusive environments. These accommodations are often free or very low-cost. Accommodations shared by experts in the field include:

- Involving existing neurodiverse employees in the hiring process.
- Creating in-office accommodations that are universally accessible so that everyone feels comfortable.
- Allowing employees some degree of agency over the environment in which they work, which may mean a flexible or hybrid work policy, or creating a variety of spaces in workplaces to accommodate differing needs for noise, temperature, light and social interaction.
- Leveraging a variety of communications channels to highlight inclusive practices and the experiences of neurodiverse employees normalizes the use of programs and services helps employees to thrive.



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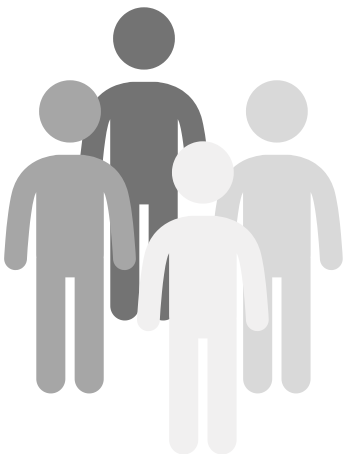
## REVIEW YOUR PROCESS FOR CONNECTING PEOPLE WITH ROLES

Many companies have found ways of adjusting their hiring processes to open their jobs up to neurodiverse individuals for whom the traditional interview process is a barrier to employment.

According to experts, in hyper-competitive fields like tech, the effort has been “amped-up” to hire more neurodiverse individuals to meet growth and talent demands. Leaders in the practice have engaged with outside experts and changed the hiring process to make it more inclusive of people facing social-interface barriers. This included making interviews more skill-based, because behavioral interviews may put neurodiverse individuals at a disadvantage. A person with autism who is an expert in Excel may answer “No” when asked a broad or imprecise question about their abilities, like “Do you know Excel?” because they cannot state with certainty that they know its thousands of available features.

Instead, competency-based interviews are more inclusive and experts recommend several additional steps to attract neurodiverse talent:

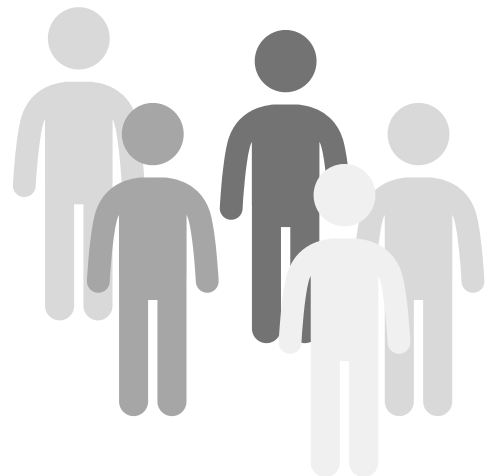
- Posting jobs where people with neurodiverse conditions are more likely to see opportunities.
- Using clear language about the information applicants should share regarding their skills.
- Making applicants aware of how the application process works and what to expect at each stage of consideration.



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Implementing procedures that educate recruiters, hiring managers, and others involved in the hiring process can help to ensure that the process is inclusive of neurodiverse individuals. The unemployment and underemployment rates are astronomically high for neurodiverse individuals, and much of it based on perceptions and discrimination. A significant reason behind this is that hiring managers do not have a full view of the employment experiences of neurodiverse individuals, which may include short employment periods, employment breaks, underemployment for their skills and education and other anomalies. Breaking the perceptions through education and exposure is a significant step towards creating inclusive environments that support neurodiverse employment.

Offering accommodations to make neurodiverse individuals more comfortable in the workplace often has broader population benefits, akin to modifications or design adjustments to support those with physical disabilities that also benefit non-disabled groups. Similarly, including mentoring in career development initiatives is an effective practice for retaining neurodiverse talent once someone has joined the organization. Once on-boarded, an integrative approach would not place neurodiverse employees on a specific development track. This involves reviewing programs and practices that might inhibit professional growth or mobility, such as performance indicators that might be tangential to the essential skills of the function and more challenging for someone with challenges to their social awareness or other skills.



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*Being inclusive means understanding that simply because people do things differently, it doesn't make them any less capable. The only assumption that should ever be made is to assume competency.*

*Diana Mirakaj-Finnerty*

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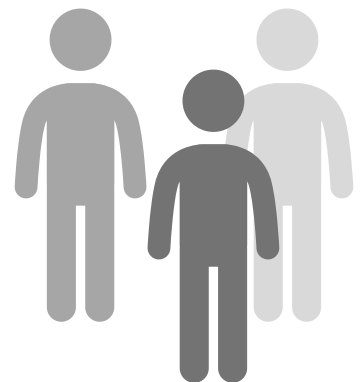
## EDUCATE THE MESSENGERS

Leadership from the top of organizations is critical in creating environments for neurodiverse individuals to succeed. Experts recommend engaging in a “nested” model of training for neurodiversity - educate those responsible for educating middle management to disseminate expectations, policies and practices that support an inclusive environment.

Fostering genuine buy-in from organizational leadership is important to achieve credibility within the entire organization. A workplace model of inclusivity requires leaders to message to all employees more effectively. Diverse and intentional communications also have a significant impact in creating accessible workplaces. Experts recommend:

- Communicating in a way that is most comfortable for everyone is important. For example, some people are more comfortable in virtual meetings with their cameras off.
- Be clear in internal communications to employees. Ask, what are you trying to say, and how can we say it in a way that everyone can understand?
- Communicate widely and regularly about the supports offered through accommodations. People need to be able to know about the accommodations before they hit a crisis level.

Organizational leadership needs to demonstrate that the commitment to neurodiversity is not performative, and they can do this by sharing their own experience with neurodiversity. By being more candid and transparent, and demonstrating their own humanity and vulnerability, they can help other employees feel more comfortable with their own differences and exceptionalities and be a good role model throughout the many different types of management areas that are present in the workplace.



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Experts also encouraged managers to model transparency around mistakes and problem-solving because it can be particularly beneficial for neurodiverse employees.. Limited employment experience or lack of guidance around what a “normal” work error might be may lead neurodiverse employees to question whether they have the capability to succeed in their role when they have made a mistake. This can lead to a great deal of anxiety and self-doubt among neurodiverse employees who may not have the experience or confidence to accurately view their performance relative to their peers.

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*The public always hears about the downsides of neurodiversity. It's crucial to break preconceptions to create truly inclusive environments and promote hiring.*

*Organizations should approach neurodiversity with a positive frame of reference and a willingness to embrace the unknown. They should also embrace flexibility.*

*Dr. Jennifer Sarrett*

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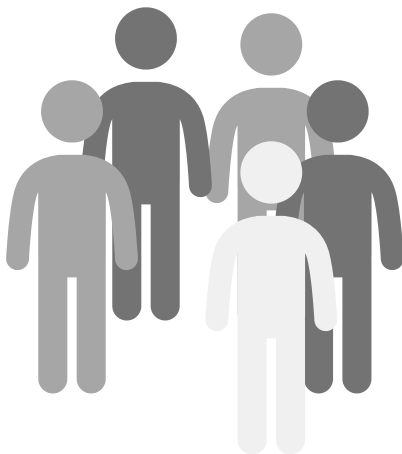
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## BRING IN A SPECIALIST

Bringing in outside expertise on neurodiversity is an effective practice for embedding and expanding inclusion in the workplace. It is also a good practice to be led by the community that is impacted, but with the support of leadership. Examples of accessing external resources include:

- Talking to a peer at another organization about neurodiversity in their workplace.
- Visiting a workplace that has spaces for differing comfort needs to see how they function and meet the needs of different worker types.
- Research expert publications, particularly case studies related to your industry.
- Engage an expert or an organization to provide additional training and consultation.

One of the main priorities for working with an external expert is ensuring that organizations understand their practices for when that external expert is no longer in place. Creating meaningful inclusion means that the programs and practices are enduring. However, looking for outside expertise does not have to rest on a certain point in the evolution of your neurodiversity strategy and workplaces are encouraged to consider external resources at any time.



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*When a company makes a sincere and long-term commitment to doing something its workforce perceives as for the greater good, it benefits the organization. It increases morale among all employees.*

*Dr. Susanne Marie Bruyere*

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## MEASURING SUCCESS, MARKING AREAS FOR IMPROVEMENT

When developing an approach to neurodiversity, it is important to focus on the goal of the workplace and the outcomes that best serve the organization. Experts note that a significant barrier companies face is refusing to move away from policies and procedures that have no clear benefit but that are supported by historic practices. Employers can get stuck in their own procedures and ways of working that it can prevent large and small changes that would support a truly inclusive environment. Experts recommend developing metrics to respond to the following questions:

- Are neurodiverse individuals moving through the interview process?
- What is the experience of neurodiverse people currently in the workforce?
- Is there equity in advancement within the company for neurodiverse employees?
- Is workplace environment supportive in a way that employees feel comfortable self-disclosing?

It is important to understand that you may never be able to pinpoint the number of neurodiverse individuals in your workplace. However, you can track the impact of a neurodiversity strategy by intentionally creating opportunities for individuals to engage with the organization to support their exceptionalities. Experts recommend:

- Leveraging communities and crafting job postings that increases the likelihood of neurodiverse individuals applying.
- Sharing public statements, like a statement from leadership on the website, committing to hiring a diverse workforce including neurodiverse individuals.
- Offering an engagement survey that allows people to self-identify or anonymously disclose.
- Building employee or colleague resource groups that support individual sharing of experiences.

The mark of success is not checking a box for having made an effort, it is that you have a program for individuals who are now fully engaged. It is inclusion.

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## Next Steps for Employers

To start creating a neurodiversity-inclusive workplace, companies can take a few preliminary actions:

1. Conduct an internal assessment and solicit feedback from employees about what practices may already be helpful to support neurodiverse employees in your workplace.
2. Next, consider the needs of the organization and where incremental progress can be made. Aligning with shared goals can build support for inclusive practices and create momentum for the effort.
3. Assess how organizational values, systems, expectations and culture to may be barriers and create a roadmap for leadership to follow to implement change where opportunities exist.
4. Build awareness of neurodiversity at all levels of the organization to create lasting change.
5. Share the work of the organization in business forums to inspire others.

One Mind at Work is a resource you can leverage as you consider how you can support neurodiverse talent in your workplace, and we hope you will consider reaching out to us as you use this and other tools to design a neurodiversity strategy that works for your organization.

