

## Neurodiversity in the workplace

Transcript prepared for HR & Compliance Centre by Callisto Connect.

**Laura Kimpton:**

So, once reasonable adjustments are in place your responsibilities to your neurodivergent employees are not finished. Line managers should conduct regular reviews of how appropriate and effective they are.

**Robert Shore:**

Hello, and welcome to the Brightmine podcast, formerly known as the XpertHR podcast. Brightmine is a leading provider of people data, analytics and insight, offering employment law expertise, comprehensive HR resources and reward data to meet every HR and organisational challenge and opportunity. You can find us any time of the day or night at <https://www.brightmine.com>.

My name is Robert Shore, and today I am joined by Brightmine HR strategy and practice editor Laura Kimpton, who will be talking about how organisations, and line managers in particular, can support and champion neurodiversity in the workplace.

Hello, Laura.

**Laura Kimpton:**

Hi, Robert.

**Robert Shore:**

So, training around neurodiversity is really important here, isn't it?

**Laura Kimpton:**

Yes, and one of the key ways to encourage neuro-inclusivity is to raise awareness and improve understanding around neurodiversity. This might involve a HR training initiative for all employees in an organisation or a line manager encouraging learning and building respect for difference in their own immediate teams.

It's about developing a mindset of recognising and accepting that everybody is different and that there's no universal or normal way of doing things.

It's important to recognise that many workplace customs are tailored to the strengths and capabilities of neurotypical people. For example, recruitment processes don't tend to be neurodivergent-friendly, as shown in the statistics that only 29% of autistic people are in paid employment.

**Robert Shore:**

Tell us then, what is a good starting point?

**Laura Kimpton:**

So, a good idea for any training programme will be to explore what neurodiversity is and what other related terms, such as

‘neurodivergent’ and ‘neurotypical’ mean. In a recent survey by Uptimize and the CIPD, 33% of neurotypical employees admitted to not knowing what neurodiversity is. Often people don’t understand what it means to be autistic or dyslexic or to have ADHD.

**Robert Shore:**

Okay then. What is neurodiversity? You’d better tell us.

**Laura Kimpton:**

Yep! So in a nutshell, neurodiversity is accepting that everyone’s brain works differently. Collectively we’re all neurodiverse. Having a neurodivergent condition affects how somebody thinks and processes information, and influences how they interpret and interact with the world. No two people with the same condition will behave exactly the same, especially those with autism and ADHD. In the same way that neurotypical people are all different, so too are those who are neurodivergent. We all have our strengths and weaknesses but for neurodivergent people these can be much more pronounced.

**Robert Shore:**

When we’re looking at the workforce at the moment, how much of the workforce identifies as neurodivergent?

**Laura Kimpton:**

I came across an interesting report recently from Cypher Learning, in which 4,500 employees were surveyed across the US, UK and Mexico. And in that study, 40% of workers aged 18-24 identified as neurodivergent. So it’s something that the younger generation is embracing as part of their identity and being more open about.

Unfortunately, though, HRDirector.com has also reported that half of neurodivergent employees believe they are poorly supported at work, and 64% believe they should be receiving more support from their employer.

**Robert Shore:**

Yeah, so really that’s why we’re talking about this today, isn’t it? It’s obviously important there are expectations of the kind of training that might be made available. So, I imagine a key part of any training programme will be to explain the legal duties that employers have?

**Laura Kimpton:**

Line managers should be trained on what conditions might amount to a disability and trigger the duty to take reasonable steps to assist a disabled person at work. Neurodivergent conditions are commonly thought of as non-visible or hidden disabilities, which means that someone with a neurodivergence will be protected from discrimination at work. This includes during the recruitment process, which is a common area for employers to fall foul of the law.

**Robert Shore:**

Yes, and obviously Brightmine has some case write-ups, and these can be found in the employment law cases section on the website. Is it correct that an employee does not need to prove that they’re

disabled - to undergo an occupational health assessment or medical diagnosis - to be classed as disabled and get support? Is that right?

**Laura Kimpton:**

That's right. And not everyone with a disability will want to disclose it to their employer. The focus, instead of a diagnosis or disclosure, should be on what line managers can do to help their employees perform at their best at work. If someone does disclose or a line manager suspects that they're managing someone with a disability, it's best practice to adopt a needs-led approach.

**Robert Shore:**

Right. And what does that mean, exactly, a 'needs-led approach'?

**Laura Kimpton:**

This basically means that a manager will support the person to help them be the best that they can be at work. Talk to your team member about what they think could help them overcome any challenges they might be struggling with. Treat people how they would like to be treated rather than what you think is best. Employees will often have the best understanding of what can be done to improve their performance or overcome any barriers at work.

And although these conversations may feel a little uncomfortable, try not to shy away from them or asking questions to understand how you can support your team members.

**Robert Shore:**

Okay. And how about adjustments that can be made? And these might be physical adjustments to the working space. What should managers be thinking about?

**Laura Kimpton:**

Yeah, so line managers should look to make adjustments to create a barrier-free environment for candidates and employees with a disability wherever possible. The aim is to create a level playing field and allow prospective and current employees to perform to the best of their ability. Adjustments can include physical aspects of the working environment as well as changes to policies and procedures. They're often free or come at little cost.

Of course, HR senior management or occupational health should be consulted here for their input, especially in terms of how any reasonable adjustments can be implemented.

**Robert Shore:**

Yes, and it's important that these agreed reasonable adjustments are documented and remain current and relevant. How can that be achieved?

**Laura Kimpton:**

So, once reasonable adjustments are in place your responsibilities to your neurodivergent employees are not finished. Line managers should conduct regular reviews of how appropriate and effective they are. Creating a tailored reasonable adjustments plan for the employee can help keep a record of the adjustments that are in

place, especially if circumstances change. Sometimes people are not born with a neurodivergent condition but they acquire a condition that presents with the same challenges. This is called 'acquired neurodiversity' and can include things like the menopause and long COVID. And this shows why it's important to regularly check in on your employees' mental and physical health, as their support needs at work may change if they get diagnosed with, or recover from, a condition that affects their brain functioning.

**Robert Shore:**

Right. And of course, Brightmine has a template tailored reasonable adjustment plan that can be used for just this purpose. I'll put a link in the show notes.

We've jumped on to the legalities on disability and providing reasonable adjustments to employees but let's just go back for a moment and consider what can be done to support neurodivergent people at the recruitment stage. Now, what steps can organisations, and line managers in particular, take to support this point?

**Laura Kimpton:**

While listeners will already be aware that it's unlawful to ask about an applicant's health, including any disabilities, before offering them a job, you can and should ask if they need any adjustments in relation to your recruitment process. Your HR department might include some standard wording around letting the organisation know if the candidate needs any adjustments when inviting them to interview or assessment. Or a line manager may observe something during the recruitment process that suggests they should explore adjustments.

**Robert Shore:**

And can you give us any examples?

**Laura Kimpton:**

If you notice that a candidate is struggling to answer questions during an interview, you could ask them if they're comfortable with the room or explain that they're not expected to respond straight away, and that they can take some time to think about their answer. Asking a series of questions in one go during interviews can cause overwhelm, so be mindful to avoid this.

**Robert Shore:**

Overwhelm – what's overwhelm, then?

**Laura Kimpton:**

Overwhelm is where you can't focus because there is an overabundance of information to process. So, in assessments you could allow extra time for written and reading tasks or offer to have information read aloud. Something as simple as this to my dad, who has dyslexia, can mean the difference between failing or passing a test.

Providing interview questions in advance can help with challenges with processing speed, which can impact us all when we're nervous, and helps ensure everyone is on an equal playing field.

The aim should ultimately be to allow candidates with a neurodivergent condition to demonstrate the value that they can bring to your organisation.

**Robert Shore:**

And it's also helpful to acknowledge and explain your organisation's unspoken rules and customs of the workplace when introducing a new recruit into your organisation. Is that right?

**Laura Kimpton:**

Whereas most neurotypical people can pick up the social norms or conventions of a new environment quickly, and blend in by adjusting their own behaviour, it can be difficult for an autistic person to grasp these.

Line managers could explain and clarify the rules of the office, what might be called 'unspoken rules'. For example, in your team do people ask their colleagues if they would like a drink when they get themselves one? Or if someone goes on holiday, are they expected to bring back sweets? Or if it's your birthday, do you bring in cakes?

In the Cypher report I mentioned earlier, 69% of workers, including those who are neurotypical, would welcome guidance and training to help them navigate the unspoken rules of the workplace. So this could be helpful to everyone in your team.

**Robert Shore:**

The theme of communication seems to be an integral one in supporting neurodivergent employees, Laura, not just in terms of what to communicate but how to communicate. Can you talk to us a bit about that?

**Laura Kimpton:**

Yes. It's helpful for line managers to recognise their own potentially neurotypical preferences or ways of working, including how you prefer to communicate. This can help you to show your team that these preferences are not universal for all, and open up discussion around individual team member preferences. Often people wrongly assume that others have the same working styles or preferences as their own.

Neurodivergent employees may appreciate information in multiple formats, not just via the usual methods of verbal instructions or an email.

**Robert Shore:**

Right. So I think we've got some tips here. What's the first one?

**Laura Kimpton:**

So, you could reinforce verbal instructions via video or voice notes.

**Robert Shore:**

Uh-huh.

- Laura Kimpton:** Provide deadline times and dates in visual formats.
- Robert Shore:** Right.
- Laura Kimpton:** Or provide diagrams and flowcharts for tasks. Assistive technologies such as mind-maps can help to capture and organise ideas and information.
- Secondly, line managers should think about how they communicate new tasks and instructions. A rushed delivery and a stream of multiple task requests can lead to unnecessary stress and anxiety for all your employees. This is likely to lead to poor work output, as more processing time is needed and misunderstandings can happen.
- Robert Shore:** As you say there, Laura, the truth is that a lot of the things we're discussing here can be of benefit to all employees.
- Laura Kimpton:** Definitely.
- Robert Shore:** These are possibly just things that we're pointing to and they're just good practice anyway. Anyway, next?
- Laura Kimpton:** So, give one instruction at a time and allow your employees to process what you're saying. Try to be concise, specific and avoid metaphors or clichés.
- Number three: autistic employees and those with ADHD may also benefit from help in breaking down tasks into smaller parts to prevent overwhelm or task avoidance.
- Robert Shore:** Okay. So obviously there you're getting really involved at this point, as the manager?
- Laura Kimpton:** Yeah. It's important not to micromanage, though. Line managers need to strike the right balance of trusting their employees to get the work done and stepping in and providing support and guidance when it's needed.
- And just a final comment on meetings. It's important to explain your reasoning around why a meeting is required or why you wish to speak with someone to avoid stress and anxiety. Consider how your team meetings are organised and run. Is an agenda and any related informational documents shared prior in advance? Do you stick to the scheduled start and finish times?
- Robert Shore:** Okay, let me ask you a 'why' question at this point. Why?
- Laura Kimpton:** Well, this not only helps to reduce anxiety around the unknown for an autistic person, but can help your meetings be more efficient.

Think about how you can encourage participation from everyone but at the same time don't force everyone to talk.

**Robert Shore:**

So, introducing and managing change is also an area for HR / line managers to be alert to, isn't it? This is a key area.

**Laura Kimpton:**

Yeah. For your neurodivergent employees, a change of desk, task or added, amended or cancelled calendar invite can lead to the same level of acute stress and anxiety as significant organisational changes. Often there's comfort to be found in routine and predictability which, for an autistic person, comes from an impaired ability to imagine a future that has not yet been lived.

**Robert Shore:**

Yeah. That's a really interesting phrase. Can you explain that a bit more?

**Laura Kimpton:**

As individuals with autism have different ways of learning and processing information, it may be more difficult for them to consider looking at how circumstances could change next week, next month, next year or ten years from now. Be sensitive and empathetic to how neurodivergent employees may feel about change, considering they may have invested lots of time and energy on finding coping mechanisms to deal with the current situation.

One good way to deal with this is to allow input from employees when making a change so that they can feel invested in it. Be clear when describing what's going to happen and give people time to process what you're telling them. Allow them the opportunity to ask questions, as well as time during and after the change so that employees can get used to the new reality, and check if they need further support adapting to it.

**Robert Shore:**

And it's really important for line managers to be aware of, and to support, neurodivergent employees' wellbeing, isn't it? Obviously wellbeing is a big theme for, again, everyone, so everything we're discussing here is applicable to all employees.

**Laura Kimpton:**

Definitely. And this is because neurodivergent people tend to adopt conscious and unconscious coping strategies that can cause stress and tiredness. They may mask their true self or mimic behaviour to fit in. Spending day after day at work not being your authentic self, in effect role-playing, can be exhausting. Sadly, many studies have shown that neurodivergent people are more likely to experience anxiety, stress and depression.

If an employee is struggling at work due to their mental health, reducing their workload for an agreed period could be a reasonable adjustment.



- Robert Shore:** Okay. So what are some of the ways in which you might recognise stress and anxiety? How do they manifest?
- Laura Kimpton:** Line managers may observe someone ‘stimming’, which is repetitive behaviour that helps somebody regulate their emotions. Examples could be foot- or finger-tapping or rocking back and forth. You should look for signs of this, as it may indicate overwhelm or potential for overwhelm, and that extra support or reasonable adjustments are required.
- Be mindful that every neurodivergent individual can be affected by the sensory world around them but in different ways. The working environment is one of the biggest barriers for neurodivergent employees because they can have lots of information coming in through their senses to process, and it’s often the environment that causes the challenges associated with a neurodivergent condition rather than the condition itself.
- Robert Shore:** So what can organisations do to support employees to cope with all of this?
- Laura Kimpton:** Your organisation could create and signpost a quiet area where people can go if they need some time to de-stress or recharge. If I wanted to make use of such a space, it would be beneficial to have had a conversation with my manager around how I should request some time out, and what language to use to refer to these types of breaks. If you manage someone with ADHD – or in fact, this applies to anybody – make sure that they’re not working excessively long hours during episodes of hyperfocus, and check if they’re exercising and eating and drinking enough.
- Robert Shore:** What’s hyperfocus?
- Laura Kimpton:** It’s where somebody with ADHD can go into a period of working where they just don’t think about anything else and they’re just really focused on what they’re doing and neglect their health and wellbeing.
- Robert Shore:** So how should managers go about organising social events for teams where their team may have very different ideas of what they like to do?
- Laura Kimpton:** Yeah, it can be difficult. But try to be as inclusive as possible. Social activities such as going to the pub, eating in a restaurant or attending a Christmas party can cause sensory overload for some autistic people. Be open to new and different experiences instead of opting to do the same type of social events with your team. Discuss alternative places to go or things to do. Investing in time and opportunities for your team members to socialise can help them



form bonds over shared interests and hobbies, and boost employee wellbeing. But allowing time for quiet and breaks is equally as important.

We do explore some ideas to boost and support your teams' wellbeing in our series of line manager training guides, but this is something that is best discussed with your employee by asking them what lifestyle habits work for them and how you can support that.

**Robert Shore:**

I imagine flexible working practices can really help in this case to support employee wellbeing by ensuring employees have a good work-life balance.

**Laura Kimpton:**

Yes. Having the freedom to structure your day to work when your energy is at its best, to have a break when you need to, and allowing time to exercise are all really beneficial.

**Robert Shore:**

Homeworking isn't the only flexibility that's available, though, is it?

**Laura Kimpton:**

No. Flexible working hours can be just as helpful. So for an employee with ADHD, flexible start and finish times can help them tune into their energy rhythms and optimise their periods of hyperfocus. Flexible working now may mean that employees with autism can avoid the rush hour and potential for sensory overwhelm on their train commute. But some may find the lack of structure around working times a challenge when working from home. Again, there's no one-size-fits-all approach, and this speaks to the needs-led approach to support we discussed earlier.

**Robert Shore:**

Yeah. And of course, organisations should think positively because there are some tremendous gains that are possible, aren't there? So what benefits might they see if they support employees who are neurodivergent effectively? If they really get this right, what's the win?

**Laura Kimpton:**

There are many benefits. So, understanding other people's lived experiences can help to build effective working relationships and reduce misunderstandings and frictions within a team dynamic. Many studies have shown that inclusive workplaces contribute to higher levels of employee engagements and productivity as well. Whilst neurodivergent candidates and employees may experience some challenges in the workplace, they also bring unique skills and strengths. Line managers should understand, appreciate and celebrate these.

**Robert Shore:**

Can you give us an example?

**Laura Kimpton:**

So, if a neurodivergent team member has offered up a new creative idea during a project that challenges the status quo, you could recognise them for this by nominating them for a monthly award or

bonus. Ultimately, having different perspectives on a problem or situation can create innovation, better decisions and business success.

**Robert Shore:**

Laura, that's fantastic. Thank you so much. I should say at this point – I think I've already flagged some of this – but Brightmine has three guides for line managers on neurodiversity and supporting neurodivergent candidates and employees on its HR and compliance centre. These are authored by a neurodiversity training and consultancy organisation called Creased Puddle, and all three also have a PowerPoint presentation which can be used in training sessions for line managers at your organisation.

We've already recently published a neurodiversity policy which employers can use to set out a framework for creating a neuro-inclusive workplace and the support available to individuals with a neurodivergent condition.

And with that, I'll wish you a good day and see you next time.

<https://www.brightmine.com>