



**Victorian
Public Sector
Commission**



Assessing neurodivergent job applicants

How to make assessments more inclusive for neurodivergent job applicants.

Removing barriers

Traditional parts of the recruitment process (like interviews) can be a barrier to neurodivergent people. This is because the focus is often on how someone communicates.

Many neurodivergent people communicate differently to what may be considered 'typical' — such as how they use body language, tone of voice and eye contact.

In an interview, there is a risk an employer may misinterpret these differences.

"Differences between how neurotypical and neurodivergent people typically communicate also means that many neurodivergent people often feel chronically misunderstood as their words and actions are often interpreted through a neurotypical lens." – Neurodivergent employee

Use the suggestions in this section to remove barriers in all stages of your assessment process.

This will improve the process for all candidates and not just neurodivergent ones.

Always ask people if they'd like any [workplace adjustments](#) during recruitment.

Reviewing applications

A candidate may not have said they're neurodivergent. So have an open mind when you read applications.

Here are some things you should keep in mind when you review applications:

Gaps in work history

Gaps in work history don't mean a candidate lacks ability or effort.

Due to barriers or non-inclusive practices in the past, a neurodivergent person may have found it hard to get and stay in a job.

If you see a gap in an applicant's work history, don't assume the gap reflects a lack of effort or ability.

Spelling and grammar

Some neurodivergent people have difficulty with spelling and grammar — for example, if someone is dyslexic.

Keep in mind that mistakes may not reflect the competence of a candidate.

When you review applications, focus on the substance of what is written.

"I manage a staff member with dyslexia. This employee is exceptionally bright and a joy to work with. Sometimes, they make minor spelling mistakes. These are simple things that I can correct. I know this employee worries that they are perceived by others as being careless or not being very smart, and are conscious of these errors. We had an open discussion where I let them know that I don't judge these mistakes – I am happy to correct the error in a document (when needed), knowing that this is just an area of challenge relating to their neurodivergence. What they bring in other areas far exceeds the spelling errors here and there." – Manager of a neurodivergent employee

Preparing to interview candidates

Here are some things to consider when planning for interviews:

Focus assessment criteria on skill

Humans form fast first impressions of others, which can be hard to change.

In job interviews, many of us tend to rely on first impressions and use them to assess 'culture fit'.

As neurodivergent people may communicate differently to what is expected in interviews, you may misinterpret this as them not 'fitting the culture'.

For example, a neurodivergent candidate may find direct eye contact uncomfortable and not look at you while responding in interviews. Some people may misinterpret this as not paying attention or being rude.

Many neurodivergent people are aware others may misinterpret them. So they mask or hide certain behaviours in an interview. This can be draining and make it harder to focus.

"Job interviews are stressful at the best of times. Feeling the need to be hyper-vigilant about every element of your external presentation to mitigate the chance of you being unfairly assessed can make job interviews unbearable" –
Neurodivergent employee

To reduce barriers for neurodivergent applicants, rate candidates on their skills and how much they meet the role requirements.

Don't focus on if they seem like they 'fit' in the organisation.

Involve a neurodivergent employee

Where possible, include a neurodivergent person in the hiring process and/or on the interview panel.

This can help:

- make the hiring process more neurodivergent inclusive, such as how you write interview questions

- make candidates feel more comfortable being themselves and not have to worry as much about being unfairly judged for their external presentation.

Word interview questions clearly

Check your questions:

- are clear and concise
- have a literal meaning and avoid idioms and colloquial language
- don't include jargon or acronyms
- include only one question at a time (rather than multiple questions bundled together).

Be specific with the level of information you seek. This is so candidates have context about how much information to share in their answers.

For example:

- Instead of 'What are your strengths?' you could ask 'What are 3 strengths you have that relate to this role?'
- Instead of 'What makes you interested in this role?' you could ask 'What is the main reason you applied for this role?'

Plan for a quiet location

If you hold in-person interviews, plan for them to take place in a quiet location with adjustable lighting. For example, a room with a closed door and window blind rather than a busy space with other people.

Also plan a quiet location where candidates can wait before their interview.

In case your candidate speaks with someone else in your workplace when they arrive, make sure you let your colleagues know:

- what interviews you're holding
- what rooms you've booked.

Communicating with candidates before the interview

Here are things to consider when communicating with candidates before interviews.

All interview types

Aim to give at least one week's notice for an interview and share the questions you'll ask in the interview at least 24 hours before the interview.

This can help candidates consider the questions and make some notes for themselves.

Also tell candidates:

- how to contact you on the day — it's a good idea to provide a phone number and email
- the names and roles of who is on the interview panel (and photos of them if possible)
- how long the interview will take
- how the interview will take place, including the number of questions, the types of questions and any other relevant information
- what happens after the interview (for example, if you will contact referees), and how long you expect the selection process to take.

Online interviews

For online interviews, tell candidates:

- what platform you'll use
- if they need to set up an account for the platform you're using and how to do this
- if they'll be put into a virtual waiting room or let straight into the meeting
- if you'll ask questions verbally, put them in the chat or do both
- if their camera needs to be turned on
- if they can use the chat functions during the interview.

In-person interviews

For in-person interviews, tell candidates:

- the start time of the interview and what time they should arrive if they'll need to sign in
- clear and specific instructions on how to access the building, where to go once they enter and if someone will meet them (it's helpful to include photos and instructions on anything that may be confusing to someone new to the building, such as a unique lift system)
- any parking or public transport options, with a map of how to get to your building from these options
- if it's practical, the name (and photo if possible) of any reception or security people they'll need to talk to and the person they'll be meeting
- if they'll need to bring and show their photo ID to anyone
- if they can take notes during the interview
- if they can bring someone with them for support (if they'd like to)

You can also offer a candidate the chance to visit the building in the week before the interview or send them a virtual tour of the building.

On the day of the interview

Creating a good interview experience

When you start the interview, let candidates know they:

- can ask for adjustments, including about the environment (e.g., the light level in the room)
- can take and use notes
- can take a few minutes to think about the question before responding
- don't need to make eye contact if it's not comfortable for them (some neurodivergent people find eye contact uncomfortable and may find it easier to process and respond to questions by avoiding it).

Make sure you let them know if you and other interviewers may take notes. This is so they don't feel that you not looking at them is a sign of poor performance.

At the end of the interview, let candidates know about next steps and when they'll hear from you.

Be accepting of stimming

In an interview, some neurodivergent candidates may fidget or 'stim'. To engage in 'stimming' means to engage in repetitive behaviour.

Stimming can include things like moving an object continuously in one's hand, bouncing a leg or humming.

Many neurodivergent people stim, as it can help to regulate attention, energy and emotion.

If a candidate stims in an interview, it could be something that helps the person focus. It doesn't mean they're not paying attention and you shouldn't view it negatively. Never discourage stimming.

Don't view stimming as a sign of the candidate's ability to do the job or work with others.

Alternatives to interviews

Interviews may not be the best way to assess neurodivergent candidates. Think about how you can assess the skills of candidates that don't rely on them telling you verbally.

For example, you could ask the candidate to:

- perform a task they would do on the job, such as write an email, respond to a customer or give feedback on a document
- come up with ideas on how to solve a business issue
- show you an example or portfolio of work that relates to the skills needed in the role.

Tests or pre-employment screening

Typical pre-employment tests may not accurately assess a neurodivergent person's abilities.

Instead, they can create barriers for a neurodivergent person and produce biased results.

Here are some things to look out for:

Non-literal language or idioms

A neurodivergent person may misinterpret or take more time to work out the meaning of non-literal language.

For example:

- 'hit the ground running' to mean 'be ready to start work right away' is an idiom (a saying that means something different to its literal meaning)
- 'I often feel down' is not as helpful as more precise statements like 'I often feel sad' or 'I often feel upset'.

Timed tests and/or large chunks of text

A neurodivergent person may find timed tests challenging.

For example, it could take longer for a dyscalculic applicant to do a test if it involves numerical calculations.

Some neurodivergent people find large blocks of text hard to process or miss words as they read.

This can be even harder if an assessment is timed and/or doesn't allow text-to-speech functions.

Neurodivergent biases

Some commonly used pre-employment screening tests negatively score traits that are more common in neurodivergent people.

If you use personality testing, consider how relevant and useful they are for assessing candidates. There may be other ways to find out what you want to know.

If using a screening assessment, review it for barriers and consider if you can adjust any aspects to be more inclusive.