



**Victorian  
Public Sector  
Commission**



# Supporting and retaining neurodivergent employees

**Learn simple steps you can take to support neurodivergent employees.**

## Workplace or 'reasonable' adjustments

Under the [Equal Opportunity Act 2010](#), you must make workplace adjustments for neurodivergent employees when requested. It may be discrimination if you don't.

Read our [workplace adjustments advice for public sector organisations](#) to find out what you need to know.

Start by asking employees what adjustments they need to do their role. These will be unique to each employee. Also give them information about how to request adjustments.

Some neurodivergent employees will be reluctant to ask for help. This may be due to a past negative experience.

A neurodivergent employee may not always know what will work for them. When you implement an adjustment, check in regularly to see how it's going. Be ready for some trial and error.

Provide the employee information about how to request adjustments, so they know how to request further adjustments in future. It may take some time in a role before an employee has a sense of what may be useful for them.

“This [organising workplace adjustments] is not a set-and-forget process” –  
Neurodivergent employee

It’s helpful to provide some options for workplace adjustments so that employees are aware of the types of support available. Connecting an employee with their Enablers network or relevant peer group can be a great resource for navigating workplace adjustments as well.

When employees consider different adjustment strategies, it’s often a sign they care about the job and want to do their best work.

Many adjustments that help neurodivergent employees can be small and are things that others may also find helpful. A neurodivergent employee may not need to request adjustments, especially if [universal design](#) has been considered (universal design is when you design something to be accessible to the broadest range of people possible).

Here’s a list of some example adjustments a neurodivergent employee may ask for:

- ability to take breaks during meetings
- a consistent workspace
- additional time to respond to questions, or complete reading and writing tasks
- allowing a flexible workplace dress code
- flexible working hours
- help speaking to Human Resources
- help filling out forms
- lighting changes (for example, less light or warmer light bulbs in an office or staff room)
- meeting agendas
- noise-cancelling headphones
- proof-reading software or the ability to ask someone to proof-read written work
- regular feedback
- sensory safe spaces, such as fragrance-free or low-light rooms
- short, regular breaks
- assigned tasks provided in writing

- text-to-speech and/or speech-to-text software
- writing assistance programs (for example, a program that checks grammar)
- work-from-home options.

You may need to help your employee in acquiring support from elsewhere in your organisation, such as requesting assistive software through IT.

## Supporting neurodivergent employees: “STOP-C”

‘[STOP-C](#)’ is a simple acronym that can be used to highlight the key supports for neurodivergent employees.

The Department of Health used STOP-C in its [Rise Program](#). We have adapted it for this toolkit.

We use this acronym to remind us to ‘stop’ and think about (and then improve) how we communicate (‘c’) with each other in the workplace.

Clear and kind communication is key when working with neurodivergent employees. Each letter represents an area that is important for you to learn and think about.

STOP-C stands for:

- Sensory – being aware of sensory sensitivities
- Transparency – providing clarity and transparency
- Organisational culture – creating an inclusive workplace culture
- Predictability – providing as much predictability as possible
- Communication – communicating clearly.

We have included more information about each area below.

### Sensory

Neurodivergent employees may be sensitive to light, smell, sound, touch or movement.

For example, some employees may find these:

- distracting, such as competing sounds that are difficult for employees with ADHD to filter out
- uncomfortable, such as background noise that can be overwhelming for a dyslexic

employee

- painful, such as bright overhead lighting causing pain for an autistic employee with a sensitivity to light.

To someone who isn't neurodivergent, these sensitivities may seem trivial. But they can have a big impact on the wellbeing of a neurodivergent employee.

Sensory issues can make it hard for a neurodivergent employee to concentrate and complete work. Always take sensory sensitivities seriously and make changes where possible.

Here are some things you can do to support neurodivergent employees with sensory sensitivities:

- ask your employee about sensory sensitivities and work out a plan on how to avoid and respond to them, such as identifying any quiet or empty spaces they can access when needed
- let them make their own adjustments such as bringing a hat or sunglasses to wear inside if the light is too bright, adjusting their uniform if the fabric is uncomfortable, working in a quieter place, or putting shade over a window
- provide a standard working location if feasible for the role (if it's a desk-based job, it can be helpful if movement of others is out of sight or minimal)
- warn of any uncommon loud noises in the workplace, such as a fire drill or building works
- create an environment respectful of sensory issues (where possible), such as asking employees not to wear strong perfume or eat hot food in a shared-desk environment due to the smell.

## Transparency

Workplaces have many unwritten rules and cultural norms that can be hard for neurodivergent employees to understand.

To support neurodivergent employees, be clear about what you expect and communicate any unspoken norms in the workplace.

## Outcomes and priorities

Provide explicit information about outcomes and priorities. It's important neurodivergent employees know what you expect of them.

As a manager, you should be clear about:

- what the work should look like — it can be helpful to give examples of past work, templates, style requirements and guidance on how much detail you want
- what dates you need work completed by — make sure you're clear on which tasks an employee should prioritise to finish first
- what level of autonomy the employee has to do their work — many neurodivergent employees will find it best if you let them complete tasks in a way that suits them
- who the audience or end user of the work is.

It can be helpful to check with the employee about their understanding of a task. This signals it's okay for them to ask you questions.

## **Time estimates**

Some neurodivergent employees will find it hard to predict how long a task will take.

Discuss with your employee:

- how long you expect a task should take and why
- the deadline to complete the task, such as if you want something in 2 hours or due on a specific date
- If they feel they have enough clarity, time and resources to do their work.

## **Be clear about what you're saying**

When you meet with a neurodivergent employee, be clear about what kind of discussion you're having.

Make it clear to them if you're:

- providing information only
- asking for their feedback
- providing them with feedback.

This context will help them understand their role in the meeting.

## **Jargon, acronyms and instructions**

Explain your organisation's jargon, acronyms or any specific terms you use.

You may want to make a glossary of terms for new employees to refer to, such as something like the [Practice Dictionary](#) in the Child Protection Manual.

If you have shared equipment like printers or projectors, place instructions next to these or show employees where they can find the instructions.

## Organisational culture

"The daunting prospect of starting a new job is amplified for many neurodivergent individuals who feel isolated without a community. Creating a welcoming atmosphere where at least a few co-workers show a genuine desire for them to stay can make all the difference in their employment journey." – Neurodivergent employee

Team inclusion and treatment by co-workers has a significant impact on neurodivergent employees retaining employment.

When you focus on creating an inclusive organisational culture, you'll:

- help neurodivergent employees feel safe and able to thrive in the workplace
- set the standard for how colleagues and peers should treat neurodivergent employees.

Here are some suggestions:

## Give and be open to receiving feedback

Create a culture where feedback is the norm.

Set up a regular time to talk with an employee about:

- what is going well
- where things could be improved (explain why and give an example)
- any feedback they have for you.

It's important to let neurodivergent employees know if they're doing well. Do this in the early stages of their role or after change, such as at the start of a new project.

## Encourage questions

Create a culture where you welcome employees asking questions.

This can help a neurodivergent employee understand a new task or process.

You should let your employee know:

- how and when they can ask questions — for example, you could set up a regular meeting, let them know in what contexts to use email or direct message, or advise them of a time of day you're likely to be available
- how long you usually take to respond to questions — this helps provide certainty to your employee and prevent unnecessary follow-ups to check if you received their question
- how you treat urgent vs non-urgent questions — including what you define as being urgent and when they should call or email
- who the best person is to approach for different questions or issues.

Also have a way for people to ask you questions directly and privately. Don't only let people ask questions in a group setting. This can be uncomfortable for some neurodivergent employees.

"This was my saving grace at the start of my work in government. Each day I would make a list of questions I had and once every day or so I would do a quick-fire question session. My manager was so encouraging and open to this approach and it really suited my learning style while ensuring I wasn't taking up a load of my manager's time in parts through the day." – Neurodivergent employee

## Learn their strengths and challenges

Create a culture where a neurodivergent employee feels comfortable to be honest with you about what support and/or [workplace adjustments](#) would help them to do their job.

You can help by starting a discussion about what some of their options are. This may make employees feel comfortable requesting support later.

Take time to learn about the strengths and challenges of each employee to understand:

- where they need less support and attention
- when you need to give more time or information to solve problems or challenges

- what adjustments you could suggest for them.

For example, a dyslexic employee may have challenges with reading and writing. By giving access to text-to-speech/proofreading software and more time to read written documents, they can work to their strengths.

For another example, a dyscalculic employee may have challenges calculating expenses or planning a budget. It may be helpful and save time to show the employee any organisational templates or past examples of budget or expense tracking. Being dyscalculic shouldn't exclude someone from a role that involves numbers.

## Offer flexible work time and location (if possible)

A flexible approach to working time and location can help neurodivergent employees.

For example, some neurodivergent people may find it difficult to keep track of the passage of time (also known as 'time blindness' or 'time optimism'). This can lead to challenges such as being on time for a meeting. Being late doesn't mean they don't care or aren't trying their best.

"I'm often a few minutes late to meetings. I really try my best to be on time. Often, I have underestimated how long something will take prior (whether that is travelling to the meeting location, or completing another task). It's helpful when meeting attendees don't email or call me to remind me of the meeting two minutes into the meeting. I know the meeting is happening and I'm doing my best to get there as quickly as I can. Also when I am not judged for turning up a couple of minutes late. You're welcome to start without me, I will arrive prepared for the meeting, I will give my all. I just may be a couple of minutes late to arrive." – Neurodivergent employee

A flexible start time can be helpful. For example, you may say it's okay for employees to start work between 8 am and 10 am and work a full day from their start time. Or it could be as simple as being understanding if an employee arrives a few minutes late to a meeting. Be clear when an employee must be on time for a meeting and look for ways to support them to be on time.

Working from home for some of the time can also help neurodivergent employees, as they don't need to factor in travel time and logistics before starting work. Using a visual timer can also be quite helpful.

These challenges don't mean a neurodivergent employee doesn't care or isn't trying their best. But a more flexible approach to work hours can help employees manage their



time and thrive at work (if feasible in a role).

Many neurodivergent employees will find it easier to engage with their work if they have a choice to work some of the time at home. For example, at home it may be easier for them to manage sensory sensitivities or set up a workspace where they can focus.

## **Use software in your organisation that helps neurodivergent employees**

Neurodivergent employees can benefit from project management software or email and scheduling software.

For example:

- A dyscalculic employee can use assistive technology for numerical tasks.
- A dyslexic employee can use the speech-to-text function or auto-correct features in the Microsoft suite when writing and editing their work.
- A dysgraphic employee can use their email calendar to plan and keep track of tasks and meetings.
- A dyspraxic employee can use notetaking software to assist their memory.

It can be helpful to let employees know what software is available in their role and where they can find information on how to use it.

## **Be understanding of mistakes**

Neurodivergent employees may make unintentional mistakes in their text or speech.

Be patient and accepting of this. Don't make assumptions about their abilities.

"As someone with dyspraxia, I sometimes mix up words when I am speaking, by using the wrong word or saying words in the wrong order. The meaning is usually still clear. It helps me so much when people are accepting of this and don't correct me or highlight my mistake. I sometimes worry that things like this give the impression I'm not very smart, or that I'm not trying. In reality, this is just an aspect of dyspraxia. I know the correct wording – the words sometimes just come out differently when I speak them." – Neurodivergent employee

## **Show employees you trust them**

Give neurodivergent employees flexibility and autonomy to complete tasks.

This shows employees you trust them. It also means an employee can use their strengths to complete a task in a way that suits them.

For example, an ADHDer employee may want to first focus on the parts of a task that interest them most, before doing the other parts of the task.

This may be non-linear or not how you'd approach the task. But it means they're more likely to stay engaged and do their best work.

## **Predictability**

Some neurodivergent employees will thrive with constant change, while others will be best suited for routine.

Neurodivergent employees may need more time to prepare for change. This could be prioritising where they put their energy or taking time to gather their thoughts.

Consider which parts of a role or workplace you can make predictable. If something can't be made predictable, communicate to employees that this is the case and explain why.

## **Make meetings as predictable as possible**

Where practical, give employees advanced notice of meetings.

Avoid 'pop-up' meetings and schedule them at least 2 days in advance.

Provide an agenda or information that includes:

- the purpose, length and location of the meeting
- if attendance is required, expected or optional
- what will be discussed
- what each person's role will be
- who may need to speak or present
- if any or all attendees need to prepare anything.

Try to keep meetings to an hour or less. If you can't do this, make sure you have breaks and ask attendees if they need adjustments.

For example, an ADHDer may want to present in the first hour.

"I attend monthly 2-hour meetings for a committee I am a part of. All members are required to speak on 1-2 occasions per meeting for 5 minutes relating to content we have reviewed between meetings. As someone with ADHD, if I am scheduled to speak in the second half of the meeting, I find it taxing monitoring the time until I need to speak. I recently (nervously) asked if I could be scheduled to speak within the first hour of each meeting. This request was accepted, and the organisers were polite and thanked me for sharing my needs. It was such a relief. I am now a more effective contributor to the meetings, and paying attention for the whole meeting is now possible. I am also proud to be on a committee where our needs are considered and heard." – Neurodivergent employee

If you hold the meeting in person, book a room where a neurodivergent person can adapt it, such as dimming the lights or closing the blinds. Allow attendees to take notes.

If you hold the meeting online, ensure everyone knows how to access the meeting link and use the technology.

For all meetings:

- ask if anyone needs adjustments and tell them what accessibility features they can access
- confirm the meeting's purpose and how to take part, such as if they need to raise their hand or use the chat
- try not to put anyone on the spot for things you didn't ask them to prepare for or make clear to them what their role beforehand
- if you'd like someone to present, do something or take minutes in a meeting, check they're okay to do it in advance.

If you'd like to meet with an employee to discuss something, tell them why so they can prepare.

Neurodivergent employees may assume that a statement like "I need to speak with you" without context means they've done something wrong.

Find out other ways to [hold inclusive meetings and events](#).

## **Provide advance notice for changes**

For any upcoming changes, let employees know:

- if their role is affected
- the reason for the change
- when the change will happen
- anything new they can expect after the change
- where and when they can learn more or who they can talk to.

For example, if an employee will soon be moved from one project to another, it can help to explain:

- why they are being moved (so they don't assume it's due to poor output)
- when the move will take place
- what the new project will look like
- when they can learn more about the new project
- who they can ask questions about the change.

As another example, if your employee will have a change in manager:

- ensure the new manager communicates with your employee
- ensure the new manager understands your employee's needs
- confirm your employee's adjustments will remain in place (if applicable)
- discuss the change with your employee
- if feasible, remain a point of contact for your employee in the weeks after the change.

It's good to explain any changes like this so that employees understand if the changes relate to their performance.

If you don't make the reason clear, neurodivergent employees may assume changes are due to them having done something wrong.

With any changes, empathise with your employee on its impacts and acknowledge how difficult change can be.

## **Be open about unpredictable parts of a role**

If possible, tell your employee:

- what parts of their role can't be predicted and why
- what you expect of them in their role, even if there are unpredictable parts.

Help them to learn how to identify which unpredictable tasks are urgent, can wait and who to ask if they're unsure. This includes any upcoming tasks they may need to do at short notice.

While some neurodivergent people will thrive in high-pressure and unpredictable roles, they'll still want you to be clear on expectations.

If a role or project has a lot of change or is unpredictable, explain this in advance.

If you know a role will be like this at the recruitment stage, make this clear in your position description.

This gives a neurodivergent person the choice as to whether they want to apply, based on what they know of their strengths, challenges, and preferences.

## **Communication**

Clear communication is essential.

Ensure employees can check with you if their interpretation of what you communicate is correct.

## **Empathise with diverse communication styles**

When neurodivergent and non-neurodivergent people communicate with each other, there can be misinterpretation by each person. This is because neurodivergent people may have different ways of communicating than expected.

When working in a neurodiverse team, find ways to communicate with each other that make sense to all people, rather than expecting only one person to change.

It can be helpful to discuss with your team how each person communicates. For example, you can ask:

- What are everyone's preferences?
- What forms of communication does everyone find easier or more challenging?

Even non-neurodivergent employees will have communication preferences. Having this discussion can help teams work together and reduce the chance of miscommunication.

Here are some examples of what some neurodivergent employees may prefer when they communicate:

### **Not making eye contact**

Some neurodivergent employees may not make eye contact with you or may look around when they talk to you.

This can help them focus on what you're saying and doesn't mean a lack of attention.

You can make employees feel more comfortable by telling them they don't need to make eye contact.

### **Taking very detailed notes**

Some neurodivergent employees are very detailed in written notes or work outputs.

This can mean they're engaged with the material or could be a way they keep a record of important information.

For example, a neurodivergent employee may write a long email. This may be so they have a detailed written record of an issue in case they need it in the future.

### **Expressing thoughts in different ways**

Some neurodivergent employees find it easier to express their thoughts in writing. Others find it easier verbally.

Some may need a little more time than others to think while talking, which can mean they draw out sentences or ideas.

"I prefer expressing my thoughts through writing because it allows me to articulate my ideas more effectively. Writing is slower, allowing me to carefully choose my words and edit as needed. Unlike verbal communication, there's no pressure to respond immediately, which enables me to convey my thoughts more clearly." – Neurodivergent employee

It can be helpful to:

- be flexible in how employees communicate and present information, based on their strengths

- be patient if an employee is taking more time than expected to communicate something verbally.

## **Be clear on how the team communicates**

Managers must make it clear how they expect people in the team to communicate with each other.

If you use many communication channels in your team, a neurodivergent employee may find it challenging to know which channel to use when, such as email, phone or a platform like Microsoft Teams.

It can be helpful to let your employees know:

- what form of communication you use in specific contexts, such as Microsoft Teams for a project or email in another situation
- what type of communication an employee should prioritise to check over others, such as if your team uses a group chat as its primary communication channel
- what type of communication an employee can deprioritise and not read in detail or only when time permits, such as organisation-wide newsletters (if you don't make this clear, a neurodivergent employee may unintentionally prioritise unimportant messages over their work tasks)
- how long you expect a response to take and if this expectation changes based on the type of communication (if you don't make this clear, a neurodivergent employee may think all forms of communication require an immediate reply)
- any standards you expect when using email vs instant messaging, such as who should be included in emails or how formal to be
- any important boundaries you want to put in place, such as no contact outside of work hours or only using email to contact others out of work hours
- what flexibility they can have based on their individual needs.

If you're clear with these guidelines, you'll ensure a neurodivergent employee doesn't feel they need to stop their work to reply to every message immediately.

## **Check everyone understands your expectations**

Always check that everyone understands your expectations around communication.

To best support a neurodivergent employee, you can:

- send your expectations in an email or document they can refer to when needed

- check in on their understanding and provide a way to ask questions
- give employees time to process any new information, as they may ask questions after they've taken time to understand instructions.

"Our team has a great culture that when we share information with others we will often check in to see if the information made sense to the recipient and we typically include offers to discuss the content in our emails." – Neurodivergent employee

## How to work through challenges

If a challenge arises, consider if it could be related to the employee's needs as a neurodivergent person. Think about what adjustments you can make to reduce any possible barriers for them.

Neurodivergent people are often creative problem solvers. Having a supportive problem-solving discussion with the employee may lead to solutions.

Here are some example questions you can ask yourself as a manager to work through challenges:

- Does the employee have role/task clarity?
- Does the employee clearly understand the priorities and deadlines for tasks?
- Is the challenge about something in or out of the employee's control?
- Is there something you adjusted in the environment that may have impacted the employee's safety or wellbeing?
- Has there been a miscommunication?
- Is the challenge about the employee providing honest feedback about their experiences or issues and can you resolve it by understanding each party's point of view?
- Are there any adjustments you can put in place to assist the employee to work to their strengths?
- Is there someone the employee can communicate with to ask questions when needed (who has the time to provide answers/guidance)?
- What/who can support the employee at this time?
- What steps can be put in place to help reduce the likelihood of similar challenges in the future?