



**Victorian  
Public Sector  
Commission**



# Career development for neurodivergent employees

**Resources to guide you in supporting the career development of neurodivergent employees.**

## **Empowering neurodivergent employees to thrive**

Neurodivergent people navigate a world that may regularly feel uncomfortable or hostile. But by making small changes in your workplace, you can better support a neurodivergent employee to succeed.

As with all people, neurodivergent people have unique strengths and challenges.

They may be very skilled in one area but find a similar area more difficult. There are also likely to be opposing strengths between neurodivergent employees.

For example:

- some will have strong attention to detail, while others will excel at big-picture and long-term planning
- some will thrive in dynamic high-pressure situations, while others will work best in environments that are more consistent and predictable.

Don't assume someone's level of competence. Speak with neurodivergent employees and let them share their skills and experience with you.

To understand each neurodivergent employee's strengths and challenges:

- have open and honest conversations
- give the opportunities to try new things.

This will make a big impact on an employee's success at work and their career progression.

By doing this, you'll help employees reach their full potential. They may also be more likely to feel safe, respected and able to raise future challenges with you.

"I think a big barrier that a lot of workplace organisations aren't really aware of is the over emphasis on being a good 'fit' for the company or team. People often think they'll be more comfortable and be able to get along better with people like themselves, but I think it's a real disadvantage in a workplace. I wish employers would see the value I can bring in my work, rather than worrying if I'm 'likeable' or 'charismatic' enough. By not giving people like me a chance, I think it really limits the growth potential of an organisation and can lead to stagnation." – Neurodivergent employee

## Performance reviews

Take time to clearly communicate to neurodivergent employees what's going well, and what could be improved.

Neurodivergent employees may also benefit from more frequent and regular feedback discussions. This can help them know where they're at and how they can continue to succeed (particularly in the first year or so).

"I feel I am at a disadvantage when I do my PDP [Performance Development Plan] because I have trouble transferring the practicalities of my work to the concepts of the PDP goals. I also have significant issues with confidence and self-perception as do many other adults with autism." – Neurodivergent employee

If an employee is underperforming, be clear about your expectations and where they're not being met. Provide explicit but sensitive feedback and approach the discussion from a problem-solving perspective.

In the development of this toolkit, some neurodivergent employees said they had

experienced problems with the performance development plan (known as their 'PDP' in many organisations).

"PDP is so challenging! I have a genuine crisis of confidence every time I need to do my PDP." – Neurodivergent employee

These included:

- Being new to the process — neurodivergent employees may be new to the process of considering strengths and challenges and how to develop this understanding of themselves.
- Difficulty with self-reflection — neurodivergent employees may be very critical in self-assessment or feel unable to self-assess due to low self-confidence or how to turn their practical work into performance goals.
- Unclear expectations or instructions — neurodivergent employees may be unclear on how to answer or complete the process if there is no 'formula' or standard approach to complete a performance plan.
- Receiving broad or general praise — it can be hard to apply non-specific praise or positive feedback if it's not directly linked to a specific piece of work or goal in the performance plan.

"I receive praise for the "outstanding work" while not really understanding what it is in relation to, which impacts being able to feel a sense of accomplishment for my actions." – Neurodivergent employee

Work with your employee to identify where you can modify the performance plan process to support their career development in a way that works for you and your organisation.

Some things you can do are:

- provide clear, step-by-step instructions that detail what they need to write about and the outcome you want to see, rather than leaving it an open process with multiple ways to complete the performance plan
- consider if any metrics you use to evaluate performance suit the employee's strengths and challenges (and if these can be adjusted)
- explain (and ensure understanding of) the metrics you'll use to evaluate your employee's performance and how you'll apply the metrics so they know what to focus on in their work

- collaborate with the employee from the start on their performance plan reflections and help guide them with specific instructions, rather than only reviewing what they write at the end
- link your feedback on what is going well or needs to improve to specific work or tasks so they can apply this to their day-to-day work.

"I would like to see the option of alternative approaches to the PDP process – doing them together or having a less formal process that is documented afterwards in the PDP system" – Neurodivergent employee

## Career progression

Neurodivergent employees may face more barriers to progressing their careers.

Career progression often requires or includes managing other people. Some neurodivergent people may not feel that people management is a strength or preference of theirs.

Others may be interested in this but underestimate their capabilities. They may also be overlooked during promotions.

Some tips to approach career progression for neurodivergent employees include to:

- develop career progression opportunities that aren't directly related to employee management such as project-based management
- talk openly with employees about what work they'd like to do or challenges they'd like to address
- provide opportunities to develop or get exposure to leadership skills, such as coaching opportunities or shadowing a senior employee
- encourage and support employee involvement in committees or peer groups outside of their main role
- encourage and alert employees to secondment opportunities and professional development opportunities
- think about what is needed in leadership and what unique skills neurodivergent employees could bring to these kinds of roles
- introduce employees to colleagues who could act as a mentor.

## Using the VPS Capability Framework

Neurodivergent employees and managers may want to use the [VPS Capability Framework](#) to discuss:

- expectations
- performance
- development goals.

The framework includes manager and employee guides, a self-assessment tool and a development plan template.

Even though the framework is for VPS employees, public sector employees may find some of the contents useful.