



FLEXIBLE WORKSPACE DESIGN TOOLKIT

Actionable Steps for Employers Fostering Focus and Comfort

Introduction

One in five UK employees is neurodivergent, yet most workplaces are designed around neurotypical preferences. This toolkit provides employers with practical, evidence-based strategies to create flexible workspace environments that support focus, comfort, and productivity for all staff, with particular benefit to neurodivergent employees.

Sensory sensitivities, attention regulation needs, and environmental preferences vary significantly across neurodivergent profiles. Rather than one-size-fits-all solutions, this guide focuses on offering choice, flexibility, and accommodation alongside clear communication.

Understanding Neurodiversity in the Workplace

- Neurodivergence includes autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyscalculia, dyspraxia, and other neurological differences. Common workplace challenges include:
 - Sensory overwhelm from open-plan offices, fluorescent lighting, or background noise
 - Difficulty maintaining focus in high-stimulation environments
 - Need for movement breaks or alternative posture support
 - Communication and social processing differences requiring clarity and structure
 - Variable energy levels and need for flexible scheduling

Key Point

Workplace accommodations benefit everyone. Features designed for neurodivergent employees support introverts, parents managing caregiving, and staff with disabilities.

Creating a Sensory-Aware Physical Environment

Lighting

- Replace fluorescent lights with LED bulbs (colour temperature 4000K or warm white 2700K) where possible
- Provide task lighting at individual workstations to allow personalisation
- Install dimmers in collaborative spaces to allow adjustment



- Offer desk lamps or natural light access so staff can control their immediate environment
- Consider circadian lighting systems in break areas to support biological rhythm regulation

Noise Management

- Designate at least one quiet zone or silent area
- Provide noise-cancelling headphones as standard equipment
- Use acoustic panels or soft furnishings to reduce reverberation
- Establish "focus time" periods where meetings are discouraged
- Create phone booth areas for confidential calls
- Offer sound masking apps for headphone use
- Set team norms around response times to reduce interrupt anxiety

Implementation Tip

Work with neurodivergent staff directly when upgrading physical environment. Preferences vary widely; offer choice and consult end-users.

Flexible Scheduling and Work Patterns

Neurodivergent employees often have variable energy, focus, or communication needs. Flexibility in timing and location improves both productivity and wellbeing:

- Offer core hours with flexibility on start/end times
- Allow remote working for focus-intensive tasks
- Permit "focus days" where meetings are blocked
- Support staggered schedules or part-time roles
- Allow movement breaks without stigma
- Respect "do not disturb" status on chat
- Avoid surprise meetings or last-minute changes
- Build "buffer time" between back-to-back meetings

Technology and Communication Tools

Clear, transparent communication reduces cognitive load and anxiety:

- Default to written communication rather than chat or phone calls
- Provide meeting agendas in advance; record meetings
- Use video captions during calls
- Establish guidelines: when to use async vs. synchronous communication
- Avoid immediate response expectations; set realistic norms
- Use accessibility features on documents
- Provide documentation and written instructions as standard
- Schedule "no-meeting" days to protect focus time



Research Support

Studies show task-focused work is disrupted by synchronous communication. Asynchronous tools reduce interruption and benefit all staff.

Clear Structures, Expectations, and Feedback

Many neurodivergent employees thrive with explicit structure and regular feedback:

- Write role descriptions with specific responsibilities and success metrics
- Provide written job expectations
- Schedule regular 1-to-1 check-ins
- Give feedback in writing when possible
- Avoid relying on "reading the room"
- Celebrate specific achievements
- Be transparent about decision-making
- Provide advance notice of changes

Practical Implementation: Step-by-Step

Month 1: Audit and Listen

- Survey staff on sensory and environmental preferences
- Ask neurodivergent employees directly what changes would help
- Review current flexible working policy
- Assess budget for physical changes
- Identify quick wins

Month 2–3: Pilot and Plan

- Pilot one or two changes
- Gather feedback
- Draft updated flexible working policy
- Plan larger environmental changes
- Train managers on neurodiversity

Month 4–6: Implement and Communicate

- Roll out new flexible working policy
- Begin physical changes
- Host manager training



- Create easy adjustment request process
- Highlight success stories

Month 7+: Review and Iterate

- Survey staff on satisfaction
- Gather feedback on improvements
- Normalise accommodation requests
- Share results with team
- Plan next phase

Supporting Managers in a Flexible Environment

Managers often worry flexibility means losing control. Clear guidance helps:

- Shift focus from attendance to outcomes
- Provide training on trust-based management
- Normalise flexible schedules
- Encourage managers to share their own needs
- Create space for 1-to-1 check-ins
- Emphasise accommodations support equal access
- Share FAQs and case studies

Manager Concern

Research shows that when employees have control over schedule and environment, engagement and productivity increase.

Measuring Success

Track impact over time:

- Employee engagement and wellbeing scores
- Retention rates, especially neurodivergent staff
- Rates of workplace adjustment requests
- Sick leave and absence rates
- Productivity metrics or project completion rates
- Promotions and advancement opportunities
- Manager satisfaction with flexible working

Key Sources and Further Reading



- Autism at Work Initiative. (2021). Autism-Friendly Workplace Best Practices.
- Empirical Software Engineering. (2017). Impact of interruptions on task performance in software development.
- British Institute of Professional Photography. (2022). Accessible Workplace Design.
- NHS England Neurodivergent Workplace Guidance.
- CIPD. (2023). Flexible Working and Wellbeing in the UK Workplace.
- Equality Act 2010: Public Sector Equality Duty.

This guide reflects current evidence as of 2024. Workplace needs vary; consult neurodivergent staff directly when implementing changes.

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