



POWER<sup>to</sup>FLY

# A guide to recruiting, retaining, & elevating neurodivergent talent

# Introduction

Hiring diverse talent is not enough. We know that's true when we talk about gender, or race, or country of origin — and it's true when we talk about neurodiverse talent, too.

Some [estimates](#) put the overall number of neurodivergent people at 15-20% of the global population. [Others](#) go as high as 30-40%. And despite often having unique strengths that can make big impacts on teams and projects, [HBR](#) found that up to 80% of neurodiverse people have trouble finding employment.

That's an especially big loss, because [research from E&Y and Drexel University](#) found that 51% of employees on the autism spectrum have more or higher skills than what they need to do their jobs. Meanwhile, [research](#) shows people with ADHD to be more creative and generate more ideas than those without the disorder, and dyslexic individuals often [rank high](#) for complex problem-solving, analytical thinking skills, and originality.

It's become more common to talk about neurodivergence and the value it adds in the public sphere, which is a good thing.

For instance, this March, [LinkedIn](#) added “dyslexic thinking” to its option of skills that users can display on their profiles. They launched it with the help of serial entrepreneur Richard Branson, who shared his own personal experience with dyslexia.







Per [VeryWell Health](#), we can attribute the change in acceptance and awareness of neurodivergence to:

- *More diagnoses.* Since the early 2000s, more and more people have been diagnosed as neurodivergent, including with ADHD and Autism Spectrum Disorder.
- *More advocacy.* As neurodivergent children grow into neurodivergent adults, they have increased the public's understanding of their experience through advocacy. Corporate neurodiversity programs under DEIB umbrellas, like those at SAP and Google, for instance, are often started by someone who has been personally affected, via their own diagnosis or the diagnosis of a child.
- *Changing labels.* As the definitions for different disorders change, and as conversations about them are normalized, more people feel seen and included by the neurodivergent umbrella. (For instance, Asperger's Syndrome was removed from the American Psychiatric Association's official handbook of mental and development disorders in 2013 and replaced with the more general Autism Spectrum Disorder — something that, to note, was [not universally well-received](#) by all in the community, and there are still many self-proclaimed "Aspie's" who use this term. Additionally, the definitions of [autism](#) and [ADHD](#) have changed, too.)



Neurodivergence being more common, though, can also mean that it gets reduced to the greatest common denominator. Some organizations only actively conceptualize neurodivergent folks in ways that closely resemble neurotypical people. Neurodivergence is not just ADHD and autism — it is also intellectual and psychiatric disabilities.

If you want neurodivergent folks to thrive at your company, you need to be clear that you understand neurodivergence to be a wide umbrella.

You need to be transparent about the particular kinds of neurodiversity your organization is able and aiming to support.

And you need to be thoughtful in how you build your culture, execute your retention strategies, and set your career advancement frameworks in order to help neurodivergent people succeed.



# A starting vocabulary

There are a few key terms when it comes to talking about neurodivergent talent:

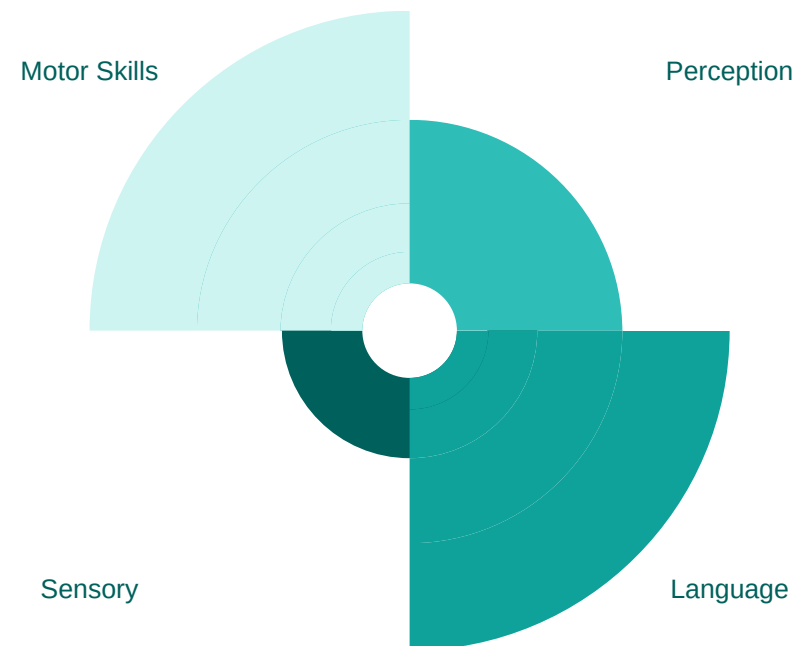
- **Neurodiversity:** “The diversity or variation of cognitive functioning in people. Everyone has a unique brain and therefore different skills, abilities, and needs” ([source](#)). The term was coined in [1997](#) by sociologist Judy Singer.
- **Neurodivergence:** “Cognitive functioning which is not considered ‘typical.’ For example, autistic, dyslexic, and dyspraxic people.” ([source](#))
- **Neurotypical:** “The term originated in the autistic community as a way to refer to non-autistic people, and is used to describe a person whose neurological development and state are ‘typical,’ conforming to what most people would perceive as normal.” ([source](#))
- **Neuroinclusion:** A diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging approach that centers, respects, and celebrates the full spectrum of neurological uniqueness.
- **Spectrum:** This word is commonly used for people with different neurodivergent diagnoses, especially autism, and it often carries the connotation of being linear — which sets up the idea that neurodivergent people are either very neurodivergent, only a little neurodivergent, or somewhere inbetween. In reality, someone who is neurodivergent may struggle in certain areas related to their diagnosis — say, executive function, sensory processing, or working memory — but resemble neurotypical folks in other areas.
- **Terms not to use:** high-functioning, low-functioning, Asperger

## Getting the spectrum right

*What people think the autism spectrum looks like:*



*Example of what it can actually look like:*



# Recognizing Strengths—And The Difficulty in Showcasing Them

Neurodiversity is an umbrella term meant to capture a full spectrum's worth of neurological uniqueness. Unfortunately, as neurodiversity becomes a larger area of focus for organizations and a buzzier term, it's not always being applied in a way that reflects that spectrum.

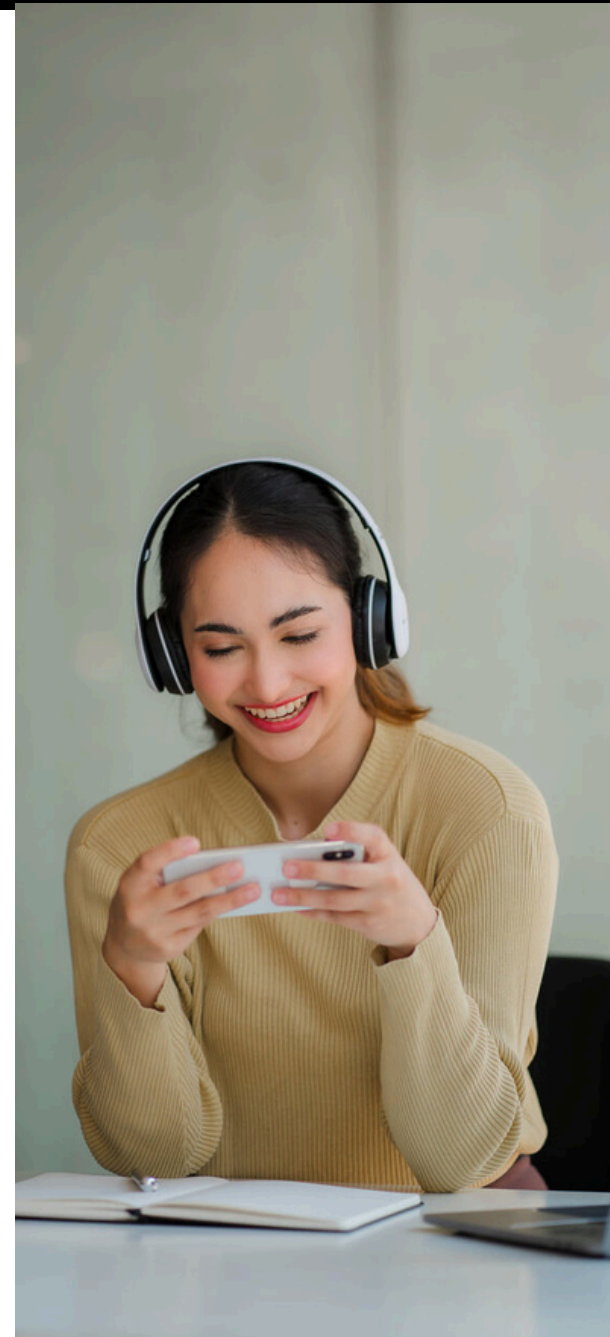
When we operate under a limited understanding of neurodiversity, that's what winds up embedded in our hiring and retention efforts — something that neurodiversity experts in PowerToFly's network have spoken to. Kushboo Chabria, Diversity & Inclusion Program Manager at Neurodiversity Pathways, and Natalia Lyckowski, Global Neurodiversity Advancement Leader at IBM and a speaker and advisor with The Rise Journey, have both shared with us the frameworks and actionable advice they use to ensure corporate neurodiversity efforts are *actually* inclusive.

- **Looking back**, many neurodivergent people, Kushboo explains, “might not have been able to gain the accommodations that they need to really thrive in educational institutions—and only a third of those that graduate with a bachelor's degree end up getting into a workplace.”
- **Traditional methods of screening talent can leave neurodivergent people out.** For instance, entry-level neurodivergent talent has it doubly tough, says Kushboo. “We're saying, ‘OK, it's already harder for you to learn because you have a different way of processing information,’ and somehow you get through the barrier of going through college to get a degree, and now we're saying, ‘We also want you to have excellent verbal and written communication and time management skills.’”



“We need to make a better bid to this talent pool to understand what they are facing and make it easier for them, so that they have a place that they can belong. We all need that dignity. We all need the ability to go somewhere and feel like we're working towards some kind of a purpose.”

— **Kushboo Chabria**, Diversity & Inclusion Program Manager, Neurodiversity Pathways







- **But when they do get in, they bring unique talents.** As Natalia puts it: “Many neurodivergent people can see things in a different way, see the big picture, and make connections others haven’t made. These are people who are deeply passionate and literal and fair and honest — maybe too honest sometimes, but that can also be exactly what you need.” Other strengths, depending on the exact diagnosis involved, can include:

❖ Amazing working memory

❖ The ability to think outside the box

❖ The ability to recall facts

❖ The ability to put together ideas from different fields

❖ The ability to focus without distraction

❖ The ability to bring creativity and innovation to teams and projects

❖ Advanced pattern recognition

❖ Passion and interest in unique subjects

Keep in mind, though, that not all neurodivergent people present in the same way, and you shouldn’t assume you’ll see the same kinds of strengths across the board. “If you’ve met one neurodivergent person, you’ve met one,” says neurodiversity coach Nathan Whitbread to [FastCompany](#).

- **In other words, hiring neurodivergent folks isn’t just to their advantage — it’s to yours.** “It’s not a pity hire. It’s not box checking,” Natalia says. “This is talent and this is skill that studies have already shown leads to 66% more loyalty, 32% more innovation, and 92% more productivity. So, it’s a matter of why *not* versus why.”



“Diversity of thought brings more empathetic managers, more innovation, and more value. And there is this talent pool out there waiting... If I told you there was this large community of talented people right around the corner, but you weren’t looking at them because they’re neurologically different, why wouldn’t you take that step?”

— **Natalia Lyckowski**, Global Neurodiversity Advancement Leader at IBM & Speaker

# 21 Things companies can do to support neurodiverse talent

## In Recruiting

**1. Write job descriptions with neuroinclusion in mind.** Rather than posting a laundry list of every semi-related skill you can think of, pare your job descriptions back to the essentials and free them of jargony, unclear language. Offering options like captioned videos, versus relying solely on text-based job descriptions, can be of help, too!

**2. Don't over-focus on networking and self-promotion.** Neurodivergent candidates may not be the ones who are super active on LinkedIn, says Kushboo, or who put themselves into the inbox of a hiring manager or recruiter. But that doesn't mean they aren't qualified for the job.

**3. Consider what you expect to see in interviews.** "I don't know when society decided that we should have someone walk into a room full of strangers and talk about how amazing they are and how much they want to work somewhere when they've never had the experience of working in that place," says Kushboo. When you can, make your interviews hands-on tests of what's actually required to do the job — and give feedback after interviews so people can learn how they can improve. For added accessibility, consider sharing your interview questions with candidates in advance, too.

**4. Check your own biases in how you evaluate and interact with candidates and employees.** For instance, do you feel like someone is untrustworthy if they can't look you in the eye? Or if they don't have a strong handshake?

**5. Be upfront.** Identify gaps around neuroinclusion in your hiring and onboarding efforts and communicate them to candidates. Let them know what stopgaps are in place and what you're working on.

**6. Earn the trust of the neurodiverse talent you already have.** The focus for a lot of DEI teams may be on recruiting, but don't forget: Odds are, you likely already have folks who are neurodivergent at your organization. Earning their trust isn't just the right thing to do; it can help make the case clearer to other neurodiverse talent that you're a safe, supportive place to work. "If you build that culture of not awareness, but acceptance — awareness is passive, and we need acceptance to be proud of who we are — then you can bring in your new hires and have them land on fertile soil and succeed," Natalia says.







## In Onboarding Talent and Building Communities

**7. Make your onboarding clear and explicit.** Instead of waiting for candidates to take the initiative and be great networkers, formalizing things like expectations, team structures, key processes, and workplace best practices can help neurodivergent talent have a smooth start to work. Segmenting this info into different stages of onboarding can help, too.

**8. State that you value neurodiversity and see it as a priority.** This can help people feel more comfortable sharing their story and asking for the support that they need. And vitally, it can help them feel more psychologically safe at work. In Kushboo's experience coaching neurodivergent talent, she says that "98% of people will not disclose their diagnosis, especially if neurodiversity is not listed as a DEI priority." Being purposeful with our language could help change that. As Natalia put it: "How do we build a culture where people are safe to come out as neurodivergent? We have to say the word. We have to talk about it. It's not like saying 'Voldemort'. We have to say and show that we are neurodiverse-friendly using the word ADHD or using the word autistic."

**9. Host neurodivergent ERGs — and make sure they have executive sponsors.** In PowerToFly's Executive Forum event on Recruiting, Retaining & Elevating Neurodiverse Talent, one tech leader shared that their recruiting team looks for "culture adds, not culture fits," and then makes sure they are invited to participate in an ERG focused on them. Another leader shared that they've intentionally kept their neurodiversity ERG distinct from their disability ERG, because they "don't want either community to get diluted or feel unheard."

**10. Include neurodiverse voices in your initiatives to support them.** Assuming what this talent pool needs or how they prefer to engage will get worse results than simply listening to them. But beyond listening, granting neurodivergent folks the opportunity to *direct* these initiatives is even better. "We wouldn't have a bunch of men running an initiative for women, or white people running an initiative for people of color," Natalia says. "Representation is the key here. If you ran a program for neurodivergent people without having them as, if not the leaders, at least subject matter experts, then what you're actually doing is fostering discrimination. Unless you're actually talking to someone who is neurodivergent, frequently this becomes 'let us help them' instead of 'I'm neurodivergent and I'd like to help more people like me come in.'"

**11. Educate and make allies out of your neurotypical workers.** Neurotypical employees can gain new insight, empathy, and compassion via training and role-plays that allow them to experience situations from a neurodivergent perspective.

## In Providing ‘Success Enablers’ and/or Accommodations

**12. Move away from a deficit model.** The need to provide different kinds of support to employees isn’t a burden on employers; it’s our job, as leaders, to set up *all* talent for success. In keeping with that, Natalia doesn’t use the term “accommodations” at all, but instead refers to these support forms as “success enablers.”

**13. Embrace “conspicuous accessibility.”** This can include explicitly stating goals around inclusion, and also making clear what forms of support are available to employees, like screen readers and software tools that adjust websites for people who experience seizures or have ADHD.

**14. Adjust the way you evaluate performance.** Using a standardized system for performance reviews may, on the one hand, sound like a smart way to remove the potential for bias. But for neurodivergent employees, make sure that managers have the knowledge and ability to adapt criteria where necessary to meet and address the needs of neurodiverse talent.

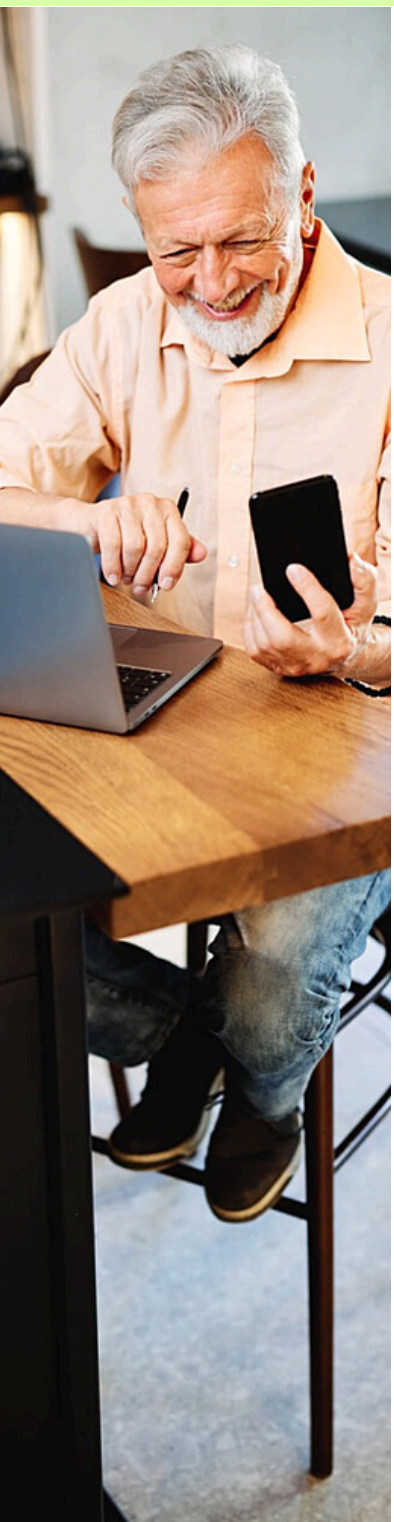
**15. Recognize that helping neurodiverse talent thrive helps other diverse talent feel safe at work, too.** “Whether you’re a person of color, whether you’re the only woman in the room, whether you’re an immigrant, if we have better communication, if we have clear expectations, if we have more agile ways of working and managing people, then all of us benefit from that,” says Kushboo.

**16. Allow people agency over how and when they work.** Letting employees listen to meetings asynchronously, instead of joining and interacting live, can help neurodivergent talent engage in ways that are best for them. (Another good tip: If you are expecting folks to join live, don’t require that people’s cameras be on.) When it comes to setting up equipment, offer a range of options — from multi-screens to headsets and other things to aid focus — so that talent can set up their workspace to reflect the way they work best. Natalia also recommends using “How to Work With Me” documents, where employees can note whether they prefer having their camera off or on, the times of day they prefer to schedule meetings, and more.

**17. And if at all possible, let people choose *where* they work, too.** “Many neurodivergent people prefer working from home because they can control their own lighting, temperature, and ambient noise,” Natalia says. “But if it’s an agile workspace, think about having a meditation room or a few rolling walls at the ready so that if someone needs to do some head-down work and build themselves a little fort, they can and won’t be interrupted.” If you do require that folks be in the office some or all of the time, Natalia also recommends implementing a sensory diet: for example, no strong perfumes or stinky foods.







**18. Make your meetings more accessible.** Recordings, via tools like Gong and Loom, make it easier for everyone to stay accountable. But you can take that a step further, too, by also sharing text transcripts of meetings. “If you struggle with working short-term memory, you can go back and look at that transcript and keyword search by your name, instead of having to listen to the whole video on fast-forward,” Natalia says. And moving meetings from, for instance, 30 to 25 minutes is another good idea, so that people have the chance to clean up their notes or take a much-needed mental break.

**19. Share documents and agendas ahead of time.** A through line we heard between folks with different neurodivergent diagnoses is that written agendas and advance notice are always a good idea. “Send things out ahead of time, especially when you’re going over a document live,” Noelle Johnson, a Global DEIB Strategist & Trainer at PowerToFly, says. “If a document is being shared and people are supposed to be collaborating on it live, I’m just catching up to read. Send documents out ahead of time, and make sure there’s an agenda set up — it really does work well for everyone, but especially for neurodivergent folks.”

**20. Be creative and inclusive in the success enablers you offer.** These can include distraction-free workspaces, dedicated workspaces (in an office or hybrid environment), noise-canceling headphones, telework options, flexible scheduling, neurodiversity coaches, mental health days, and more. And rather than presenting a set “menu” of options, one attendee of our executive forum shared that, at their company, people are asked to describe the challenges they’re experiencing — and *then* solutions are researched. “There’s not a limitation put out ahead of time that ‘this is what we do and this is what we don’t do,’” they said. “It’s very much case by case.”

**21. Create safe, private systems for seeking support.** If you have the resources, putting a set team in charge of this support system can make a huge difference for neurodiverse employees. Offering a dedicated inbox for folks to contact, too, whether that’s routed to your accommodations team or to someone else on People Ops, means people know they have a way to ask for support without having to disclose to a direct manager that they’re neurodivergent.

**Natalia emphasizes:**

*“A lot of these changes make workplaces more human-friendly and make for more empathetic workplaces. You’re going to help your neurodiverse employees, but they’re like your canary in the coal mine, because they’re extra sensitive to these things. Really, these changes help everybody.”*

# Tools that can help



[AccessiBLE](#) software to help audit your website for different kinds of users

[Autism at Work Playbook](#) by University of Washington, Microsoft, SAP, JPMorgan Chase, EY

[Mentor Spaces](#) platform for hosting one-to-group and one-to-one connections with candidates and ERG leaders, allowing candidates to connect on how the company works and what the role is really like

[Microsoft's Neurodiversity Hiring Program](#), which can help inspire companies on what a far-reaching neurodiversity program can look like

[Neurodiversity at Work Guide](#) by the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) and Uptimize

# Recommended resources

Watch: [Supporting Neurodiversity in the Workplace](#)

Watch: [Managing Disability Disclosures and Accommodation Requests](#)

Watch: [The Neurodiverse Experience In A Remote Setting & How Companies Can Improve](#)

Watch: [Discovering And Living With Non-Apparent Disabilities In A Non-Equitable World](#)

Watch: [Balancing Business Needs With Workplace Accommodations: Becoming A Compassionate Leader](#)

Watch: [The Impact Of Coaching Programs On The Careers Of Neurodiverse Professionals](#)

Watch: [Neurodiversity At Work And Beyond](#)

Watch: [Disability Inclusion In Talent Acquisition](#)





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