# NEURODIVERSITY @ WORK
# PLAYBOOK

**FEDERAL EDITION**

Finding talent and creating meaningful career opportunities for neurodistinct people

**Information School**
UNIVERSITY *of* WASHINGTON

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# About this guide

The Neurodiversity@Work Playbook Federal Edition is the product of a collaborative research project, *the Neurodiversity and Employment Initiative: Initiating and Scaling Neurodiversity@Work Initiatives across Private and Public Organizations,* led by Dr. Hala Annabi, an associate professor at the University of Washington Information School. This edition of the Neurodiversity@Work Playbook reflects the collaborative efforts of the University of Washington Information School, MITRE, and Melwood. The guidelines and lessons learned synthesized in the Federal Edition of the Playbook draw on the original Autism@Work Playbook; lessons learned from leading Neurodiversity@Work private organizations and Federal agencies; Melwood and MITRE's experience; perspectives of neurodivergent self-advocates and professionals from various Federal agencies; and the knowledge and experience of leading neuroinclusion external partners Beyond-Impact, Neurodiversity in the Workplace, and Potentia Workforce.

## The University of Washington Neurodiversity and Employment Initiative

**Dr. Hala Annabi, Director**

The [UW Neurodiversity and Employment Initiative](UW Neurodiversity and Employment Initiative) recognizes that employment is core to a person's quality of life and equitable distribution of resources and power. Neurodistinct individuals experience financial, emotional, and health benefits when employed. Employers that include and support neurodivergent talent gain a competitive advantage by meeting talent needs and improving innovation, productivity, and overall employee engagement. Since 2016, Hala Annabi has collaborated with industry partners and Federal agencies to study and document best practices to improve the employment of neurodistinct people. The Autism at Work Playbook, considered the industry standard by DisabilityIN, a nonprofit for disability inclusion in business recognized worldwide, was established in response to these efforts. Focused directly on equity and population health, the initiative seeks to improve career pathways and employment outcomes for neurodivergent teens and adults and support employers through their neuroinclusion journeys.

For more information about the UW Neurodiversity and Employment Initiative, visit [https://sites.uw.edu/neurodiversity](https://sites.uw.edu/neurodiversity).

### HOW TO CITE THIS GUIDE

Annabi, H., Thomas, T., Gibson, S., Cunningham, T., Riddle, J., Thompson, D., & Cosgrove, J. (2024). Neurodiversity@Work Playbook Federal Edition: Finding talent and creating meaningful career opportunities for neurodistinct people. Seattle, WA: ACCESS-IT, the Information School, University of Washington.

# NEURODIVERSITY@WORK
# PLAYBOOK

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# Introduction

The original Autism@Work Playbook, which was developed with private-sector employers in mind, opens by acknowledging that "shortages of skilled employees and professionals may be among the biggest constraints to growth and sustainability in the new economy."

While Federal sector recruitment and employment processes may differ from those in the private sector, they certainly share the challenge of a scarcity of talent. For one, Federal agencies report that there are nearly six and a half times more Federal employees who are older than 50 than who are younger than 30, indicating a workforce nearing retirement. Compounding the challenge of a graying workforce, several critical governmental functions lack robust talent pipelines. Across all sectors in cybersecurity, for example, "From February 2023 through January 2024, there were only 82 cybersecurity workers available for every 100 cybersecurity jobs demanded by employers." Furthermore, more than one-third of U.S. government security employees surveyed by Swimlane, a security automation company, believe their agencies' security teams will never be fully staffed.

While challenges to staffing in mission-critical areas persist, many qualified neurodivergent people remain unemployed or underemployed, largely because of systemic barriers inherent in traditional employee recruitment and selection processes. By reimagining Federal recruitment and selection processes and building neuroinclusive culture and supports, the employment situation of neurodivergent people and the talent deficit in the Federal workforce can be substantially improved. Neurodiversity@Work initiatives are not entirely new to government agencies. Australia and the United Kingdom are illustrative cases of how governmental agencies have solved talent shortages by turning to their underemployed neurodivergent communities.

This edition of the Neurodiversity@Work Playbook reflects the collaborative efforts of the University of Washington Information School; MITRE, a non-profit operating federally funded R&D centers that has been at the forefront in developing neurodiversity initiatives; and Melwood, a non-profit social enterprise committed to empowering people with disabilities through employment, particularly in the Federal sector. The guidelines and lessons learned synthesized in this version of the Playbook draw on:

- The original Autism@Work Playbook, which was based on the early lessons learned from Neurodiversity@Work champions Microsoft, SAP, EY, and JPMorgan Chase, as well as two newer Neurodiversity@Work leading organizations: Dell and Chevron.

- Melwood and MITRE's experience standing up Neurodiverse Federal Workforce pilots at the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency and the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency.

- Interviews and focus groups with neurodivergent self-advocates and professionals from various Federal agencies. The goal was to contextualize neuroinclusive employment practices to translate them for the Federal workplace and identify relevant resources available to agencies.

- Contributions from leading neuroinclusion external partners Beyond-Impact, Neurodiversity in the Workplace, and Potentia Workforce, which shared their expertise working with a range of private organizations that have successfully implemented neurodiversity hiring initiatives.

While there is no one-size-fits-all way to build a neurodiversity hiring initiative, this Playbook is written to help address initial questions and provide a framework for designing, scaling, and sustaining an initiative that is right for your agency. We included often-forgotten Federal and community resources you can draw on to assist you in launching your initiative and support you long-term.

We hope you find this resource helpful, and we welcome your feedback or suggestions.

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# The U.S. Federal Government Employment Landscape

Agencies interested in establishing neurodiversity employment programs or general practices will benefit from understanding the policies and mechanisms that encourage and enable such programs within the U.S. Federal Government employment structures. This chapter reviews the policies, executive orders, support agencies, and other general practices relevant to neurodiversity employment.

Specifically, this chapter addresses the following *key questions* you may encounter as you navigate the Federal Government's employment landscape:

**1. Which policies require or enable neurodiversity employment programs and initiatives in U.S. Federal agencies?**

    1.1. Is it legal to create targeted neurodiversity hiring initiatives?

    1.2. Why is it beneficial to create such initiatives?

    1.3. How do we create neurodiversity hiring programs/initiatives?

**2. What governs Federal hiring processes, and how do those processes impact neurodiversity hiring?**

    2.1. What hiring authorities can be leveraged?

    2.2. Which offices within our agency can help?

**3. What are existing structures and resources we can draw on?**

**4. What are other agencies doing?**

**5. Is hiring for disability affirmative action?**

**6. What are the risks if we do nothing?**

## 1 Which policies require or enable neurodiversity employment initiatives in U.S. Federal agencies?

The U.S. Federal Code and various executive orders and initiatives within the Federal Government not only enable the establishment of neurodiversity employment programs and initiatives, but also require and encourage such efforts. In this section, we elaborate on these enablers.

## 1.1. Is it legal to create targeted neurodiversity hiring initiatives?

In 1973, Congress passed the Rehabilitation Act, outlining anti-discrimination requirements for disabled Americans with respect to the Federal Government. Among these requirements is Section 501, which prohibits Federal agencies from discriminating against Federal employees and job applicants with a disability. In addition to prohibiting discrimination, it requires Federal agencies to take affirmative action to ensure the equitable representation of disabled individuals in the Federal workforce. On Jan. 3, 2017, the

> *In addition to prohibiting discrimination, Section 501 requires Federal agencies to take affirmative action to ensure the equitable representation of disabled individuals in the Federal workforce.*

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) outlined specific hiring goals for disabled individuals among Federal agencies. The EEOC intends for roughly 12 percent of employee hires to have a disability and for 2 percent of its workforce to have a targeted disability, specifically calling out autism as one of those.

In 1990, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was passed, requiring employers to provide reasonable accommodations to qualified individuals with disabilities to enable them to perform the essential functions of their jobs. Reasonable accommodations may include adjustments to the hiring process, job duties, or work environment. Neurodiversity hiring programs often involve proactively providing such accommodations to ensure that neurodivergent individuals can succeed in their roles. The ADA prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all aspects of employment, including hiring, promotion, and retention, making it critical to discover and remove barriers you may not have realized exist. While the ADA does not apply to the executive branch of the Federal Government (which is instead covered by Title V of the Rehabilitation Act), it does apply to Congress and other entities in the legislative branch of the Federal Government.

Because many U.S. soldiers receive their first neurodistinct diagnosis while they are enlisted, it is also important to note the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act, which was passed in 1994 to provide protections to veterans during reemployment. USERRA guarantees the right to reemployment for all veterans who leave their civilian jobs to perform military service, including those who may have become disabled during their service (e.g., due to post-traumatic stress). The act also requires employers to make reasonable efforts to accommodate any disabilities of returning veterans when disabilities were incurred or aggravated by service, which may include neurodivergent individuals. If a returning veteran is no longer qualified for their former position due to disability, USERRA requires employers to "help qualify the veteran for a job of equivalent seniority, status, and pay, the duties of which he or she is qualified to perform or could become qualified to perform."

> " *Reasonable accommodations may include adjustments to the hiring process, job duties, or work environment. Neurodiversity hiring programs often involve proactively providing such accommodations to ensure that neurodivergent individuals can succeed in their roles.*

## KEY ENABLERS

- **Section 501** prohibits discrimination against Federal employees and job applicants with disabilities. It requires affirmative action to ensure equitable representation of disabled individuals.

- **The EEOC** set a goal for its workforce to have 2 percent representation from people with targeted disabilities. Autism is among those.

- **The Americans with Disabilities Act** requires employers to make reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities.

# 1.2. Why is it important to create neurodiversity hiring programs or initiatives?

To maintain the U.S. lead in innovation and competitiveness, as well as to advance inclusion of all people worldwide, the Federal Government must improve employment and support of neurodivergent people within Federal agencies. It is critical to do so in order to meet the demand for talent and align with the U.S. Federal Government's aspiration of becoming the model employer.

## INCLUSION

The design and execution of proactive practices that aim to increase representation and inclusion of historically marginalized communities aligns with the values of the Federal Government and ensures that the Federal workforce 1) is representative of the U.S. population, and 2) includes cognitive diversity (various neurotypes). This is critical to our ability to provide needed services for all Americans and leverage cognitive diversity to ensure our ability to innovate and meet our national interests. In 2021, President Biden signed Executive Order 14035 "to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) in the Federal workforce." Neurodiversity hiring initiatives align with these DEIA objectives by promoting the inclusion of neurodivergent individuals who have historically been underrepresented and underserved by removing barriers they often face in traditional hiring and employment processes.

## TALENT SHORTAGE

The inclusion of neurodivergent people expands the workforce talent pool. Research suggests that 20 percent of the U.S. population is neurodivergent. Creating neuroinclusive practices and neurodiversity hiring programs will enable the Federal Government to tap into the nearly 50 million Americans who have largely been excluded from the workforce. Not only is this group untapped, many neurodivergent individuals may also have unique and much-needed talents and abilities that meet the Federal workforce's talent needs. Federal and state agencies struggle to recruit and retain talent in key strategic roles.

Various initiatives at the Federal level aim to address the talent shortage. Most notable initiatives relate to gaps that threaten national interest, addressed by President Biden's 2021 "Memorandum on Revitalizing America's Foreign Policy and National Security Workforce, Institutions, and Partnerships." This Executive Order established the Interagency Working Group on the National Security Workforce to improve hiring practices for national security staff. The working group aims to incorporate informed recommendations, diverse recruitment, barrier removal, and improved support for hiring practices, ultimately contributing to a more inclusive and effective workforce in the field of national security and foreign policy. The memorandum specifically mentions the need to "improve the ability of the national security workforce to attract and accommodate individuals who have a disability as defined in the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 or a targeted disability as defined in the regulations implementing Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act." Establishing neurodiversity hiring programs and practices aligns with the broader goal of revitalizing America's foreign policy and national security workforce while
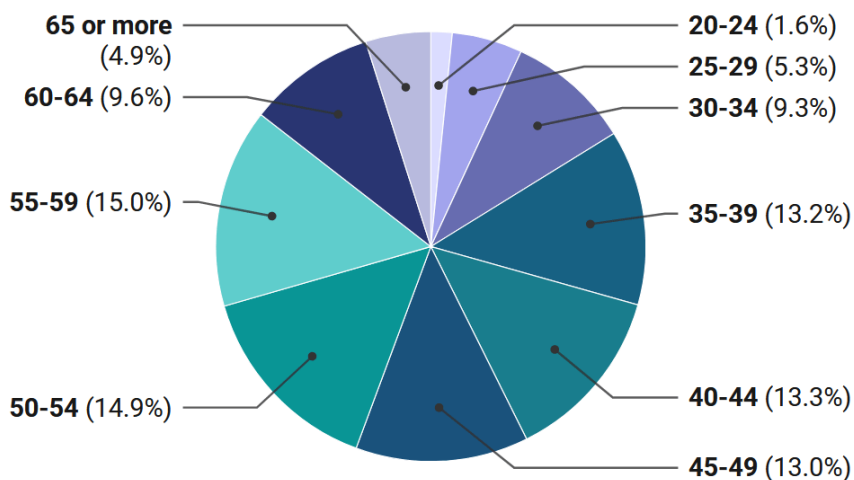
## KEY MOTIVATIONS

**Inclusion:** Practices to increase representation of historically marginalized populations align with the Federal Government's goals.

**Talent shortage:** Inclusion of neurodivergent people expands the talent pool at a time when the Federal Government has an aging workforce.

**Model employer:** As the United States' largest employer, the Federal workforce should be representative of America's diversity as a nation.

promoting equitable employment practices for individuals with disabilities.

It is also worth noting that the Federal Government is already facing an imminent threat because of its aging workforce. A 2022 report by the Partnership for Public Service found that there are nearly six and a half times more Federal employees who are older than 50 than Federal employees who are younger than 30. Furthermore, the Federal Government is lagging behind industry in attracting younger workers to fill job vacancies. According to this report, the share of the Federal workforce under 30 was just under 7 percent, while that same age group made up nearly 20 percent of the broader

# FEDERAL WORKFORCE BY AGE

In December 2020, less than 7% of the Federal workforce was under 30.



Federal workforce by age pie chart:
- 20-24 (1.6%)
- 25-29 (5.3%)
- 30-34 (9.3%)
- 35-39 (13.2%)
- 40-44 (13.3%)
- 45-49 (13.0%)
- 50-54 (14.9%)
- 55-59 (15.0%)
- 60-64 (9.6%)
- 65 or more (4.9%)

*Partnership for Public Service*

> "*Establishing neurodiversity hiring programs and practices aligns with the broader goal of revitalizing America's foreign policy and national security workforce.*

workforce. Barriers that exclude the nearly 20 percent of the population who are neurodivergent will only exacerbate the looming threat of a wave of retirements in the Federal workforce and the existing challenge in filling job vacancies.

### MODEL EMPLOYER

The U.S. Government has long aspired to lead the way in competitiveness and inclusion worldwide. Federal agencies also set an example for other employers in the private and public sectors in the U.S. As the United States' largest employer, the Federal workforce should be representative of America's diversity as a nation. To this end, in 2022, the Office of Personnel Management (OPM) published a strategic plan focused on "positioning the government as a model employer," outlining several objectives to support more equitable, inclusive, and enduring hiring and retention practices. Objective 1.1 of the strategic plan establishes a goal of increasing the government-wide Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Index score by 6 percentage points by FY 2026. This includes expanding recruitment and early-career programs such as paid internships, fellowships, and apprenticeships for marginalized communities and assessing demographic data to identify and remove barriers to employment, retention, professional development, and fair pay that particularly affect individuals with disabilities such as those who are neurodiverse.

*It is important to note that neurodiversity hiring initiatives go beyond national security-related roles and may address almost any area of need.*

## TAKE THE INITIATIVE

Agencies are encouraged to be proactive in removing barriers in several ways, including:

☑ Creating accessible workplaces per Executive Order 14035.

☑ Increasing awareness of employees' right to request accommodations per Executive Order 14035.

☑ Using the Office of Personnel Management's Schedule A Hiring Authority, which allows agencies to directly hire qualified individuals with disabilities who meet the job requirements through a non-competitive process, filling vacancies much more quickly than other hiring methods.

☑ Leveraging opportunities for merit-based hiring practices to evaluate a candidate's ability to fulfill job roles and responsibilities per Executive Order 13932. By reducing the emphasis on educational qualifications and increasing focus on specific skills and competencies, EO 13932 encourages agencies to recognize and establish alternative ways to assess job candidates' skills outside of traditional assessments and credentials (e.g., college degrees). This is especially true for neurodivergent candidates, who often do not fit the traditional educational qualifications often required in traditional hiring practices.

## 1.3. How do we create neurodiversity hiring initiatives?

There is no single approach or standard to creating neurodiversity hiring programs or initiatives within the Federal Government. The design and execution of neuroinclusive employment models and practices are unique to each agency's needs, culture, and resources. Some examples of how you might structure your own initiative can be found in Chapter 5. Each agency may leverage existing structures and resources within their agency or the Federal Government at large to create effective initiatives.

Some of the mechanisms within the Federal Government that may be leveraged include:

1. OPM's **Schedule A Hiring Authority.** Schedule A is an underutilized hiring authority that helps Federal agencies meet their obligations under the ADA and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Key features of the Schedule A hiring process include fewer application requirements and an expedited selection process.

2. Every agency has a **Selective Placement Program Coordinator** (SPPC) to assist in recruiting disabled individuals. The EEOC and the Department of Defense offer training programs to "ensure that the Coordinator is trained in Schedule A for people with disabilities and other excepted hiring authorities, the Rehabilitation Act, Reasonable Accommodation requirements and responsibilities, how to conduct workforce representation analysis, developing recruitment strategies, and establishing contacts with external recruitment sources to reach individuals with disabilities."

3. **Your EEO Office** knows how to leverage many different hiring authorities and is familiar with both the regulations and the enablers available regarding disability hiring.

**4.** Agencies can refer to the U.S. Department of Labor Office of Disability Employment Policy's (ODEP) [Employer Assistance Resource Network on Disability Inclusion](#) (EARN) to learn more considerations related to neurodiversity hiring programs. EARN "offers information and resources to help employers recruit, hire, retain, and advance people with disabilities; build inclusive workplace cultures; and meet diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility goals." It provides multiple resources on [recruitment](#), [interviewing](#), [employee evaluation](#), and [accommodation](#), as well as a "[Neurodiversity Inclusion: Checklist for Organizational Success](#)" for agencies working toward neurodiversity inclusion.

The remainder of this Playbook will take you through design and launch considerations to guide you through your exploration of such initiatives.

> *It is important to note that there is a two-year probationary period before becoming a competitive hire for Schedule A employees, which may not align with your agency's needs and goals and could impact the success of neurodivergent hires.*

## **2** What governs Federal hiring processes, and how do those processes impact neurodiversity hiring?

The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) is the main human resource management agency for the Federal Government. OPM maintains all human resource-related information, policies, and resources. Overall, OPM guidelines and policies govern neurodiversity hiring programs and initiatives. There are no governance structures or policies unique to neurodiversity programs and initiatives.

This section outlines specific hiring authorities and employment pathways that neurodiversity initiatives may leverage. In the remaining chapters, we will discuss how to create a neuroinclusive culture and practices.

### 2.1. What hiring authorities can be leveraged?

While there are no universal Federal regulations governing practices for neurodivergent individuals, some agencies may have specific hiring authorities. [Title V](#) of the Code of Federal Regulations defines traditional hiring practices across agencies that typically use competitive processes and is governed by OPM. These processes use standardized evaluation to determine candidates' suitability for a position. Traditional processes and procedures can lead to the exclusion of already marginalized populations, such as neurodivergent candidates, due to overemphasized normative expectations implicitly embedded throughout our standard hiring systems and ways of thinking. Competitive assessments created for neurotypical candidates may create barriers for neurodivergent candidates and do not always reveal the candidates' strengths and abilities relevant to the job, potentially disadvantaging them in the selection process. It is important to note that [variations from Title V](#) are possible and governed by OPM.

One way agencies may integrate alternative hiring strategies to reduce barriers present in traditional hiring processes is

> " *The path to work for Federal neurodivergent employees is often front-loaded, meaning temporary appointments through Schedule A and AbilityOne. This model costs less overtime but creates barriers to attracting and maintaining talent.*
>
> — *neurodivergent advocate & leading professional in the Federal Government*

through the use of different hiring authorities, including:

**1.** [Schedule A](#), a special hiring authority available to all agencies offering an alternative and expedited hiring process for Federal employers to recruit people with disabilities. Contrary to traditional [competitive hiring methods](#) such as those outlined in Title V, Schedule A allows Federal agencies the ability to hire neurodivergent candidates through a [non-competitive process](#). Applicants must meet job requirements and provide proof of disability documentation. While it doesn't guarantee employment, it simplifies the application process and enables Federal agencies to hire individuals with disabilities more efficiently, reducing the time a position remains unfilled. Agencies are able to list specific positions as Schedule A when they are posted to the [USAJOBS](#) site. Neurodivergent job seekers can identify relevant job postings using a specific icon and utilize a disabilities filter.

**2.** Title 10 in U.S. Code, another unique hiring authority under the Defense Civilian Intelligence Personnel System (DCIPS). DCIPS is the human resources management system for the Department of Defense (DoD) intelligence components and other intelligence positions as designated by the Under Secretary of Defense for Intelligence and Security. DCIPS may have competitive status/hiring processes and be considered for non-competitive — in this case excepted service.

Depending on industry and type, agencies also have the ability to hire applicants using other types of hiring authorities laid out by OPM. Broadly speaking, hiring authorities may vary by agency and industry.

For more information, connect with OPM at DisabilityEmployment@opm.gov with questions about which additional hiring authorities align with your agency's employment goals.

## MORE HIRING AUTHORITIES

To further explore hiring authorities that may be leveraged to support neurodiversity employment practices in your agency, review hiring authorities identified by OPM. A few hiring authorities to review are:

☑ Direct-Hire Authority, most suitable for cases when there is a critical hiring need that is not met through competitive hiring. IT/Cybersecurity Hiring authority is a good example of one that has been leveraged for neurodiversity hiring practices.

☑ People with Disabilities Appointing Authority is also relevant for understanding alternative hiring practices.

☑ 30% Disabled Veterans Appointing Authority may also be especially relevant to neurodiversity hiring.

# 2.2. Which offices within your agency can help?

Each Federal agency has its distinct procedures and resources for recruiting and hiring neurodiverse candidates. It is critical for any individual interested in championing neurodiversity hiring practices to connect with the service and human resource specialists responsible for the hiring processes within their agency. Additionally, most agencies have an Equal Employment Opportunity officer who oversees affirmative action compliance, making them valuable resources for understanding the specific procedures and requirements for neurodiverse recruitment. Lastly, you must also include your agency's general counsel. HR specialists, general counsel, and EEO officers can advise on relevant authorities, procedures, and practices suitable for your agency and the roles you wish to hire into.

Beyond defining hiring practices and procedures, HR specialists and EEO officers may also assist in identifying appropriate recruiting strategies and hiring authorities such as Schedule A or Veterans' Preference. While these are not specific to neurodivergent hiring processes, they ensure that neurodivergent applicants have both priority and necessary assistance throughout the hiring process. Governmental and non-governmental resources can be used for recruiting.

The following section lists some of the available resources for neurodivergent recruitment. See Chapter 6 for more on recruiting strategies.

## KEY ROLES

🔑 **Human resource specialists** are pivotal to the success of neurodiversity hiring processes.

🔑 **Equal Employment Opportunity officers** oversee affirmative action hiring compliance at most Federal agencies and can assist in identifying appropriate recruiting strategies.

🔑 **General counsel** is each Federal agency's primary source for legal advice.

*Before launching any type of hiring initiative, it is critical to check with your Office of General Counsel, Equal Employment Opportunity office, and human capital subject matter experts to make sure you are following Federal policy, agency policies, merit systems principles, and any other legal requirements.*

# 3 What existing structures and resources can you draw on?

The design, focus, and scope of such initiatives are nuanced and unique to each agency. There is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor. Each Federal agency has its unique requirements, resources, and specific needs. The past 10 years of the Neurodiversity at Work movement have demonstrated that neurodiversity employment initiatives rely on a coalition of internal and external collaborators that make up the ecosystem for such programs and maximize their positive impact on the agency and community. These collaborators help you in identifying and understanding agency factors impacting neurodiversity hiring and how to integrate relevant agency and Federal level practices and resources into effective initiatives.

Below are just a handful of resources your agency may consider leveraging when creating a neurodiversity hiring program.

## FEDERAL LEVEL

- ODEP | U.S. Department of Labor — Job Accommodation Network (several embedded resources)

- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services -Employee Assistance Program

- Social Security Administration — Ticket to Work

- U.S. AbilityOne Commission

## AGENCY LEVEL

- Agency-level employee resource groups

- Agency-level wellness programs

- Agency Equal Employment Opportunity directors

- Human resources

- Chief learning officer

- Employee engagement strategy lead, human development, or employee experience

- Business leads with headcounts or hiring managers

- General counsel

- Procurement to establish any contracts to support the program

## NON-GOVT. FEDERAL CONTRACTORS WITH NEURODIVERSITY HIRING EXPERTISE

- MITRE Corp

- Melwood

*Melwood and MITRE are not your only resources. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 created the State Vocational Rehabilitation (VR) Services Program, which was subsequently modernized by the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). State VR programs provide services to people with disabilities to help them prepare for and engage in work. These agencies often work with several non-profit organizations, which are happy to be resources for employers looking to learn more about embracing neurodiversity and disability accessibility. Reaching out to a State VR program is a great way to be introduced to these non-profit resources. The Rehabilitation Services Administration within the U.S. Department of Education maintains a list of State VR agencies.*

# 4   What are other agencies doing?

Successful neurodiversity employment initiatives within Federal agencies have already begun to set a precedent.

- In 2018, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, in collaboration with Wright State University, launched its Autism at Work program to recruit and hire autistic employees.

- In 2020, the National Geospatial Intelligence Agency (NGA), in partnership with the MITRE Corporation and Melwood, also launched a successful pilot program focused on hiring neurodivergent interns called the Neurodiverse Federal Workforce (NFW) program.

- NASA also engages in various neurodiversity employment initiatives through its NASA's Neurodiversity Network (N3).

More agencies are considering or are launching neurodiversity employment initiatives to advance their workforce and innovation goals.

## SPOTLIGHT ON …

**Autism at Work pilot initiative at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base (Ohio)**

In 2018, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base (WPAFB) in Southwestern Ohio launched its Autism at Work initiative as a pilot program. Developed in coordination with Wright State University, the Autism at Work initiative at WPAFB tapped an existing federally supported pipeline for hiring and recruiting people with disabilities. Namely, it utilized the Workforce Recruitment Program (WRP) run jointly by the U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy and the U.S. Department of Defense. Established during the 1980s as a recruitment and referral program, WRP connects Federal and private sector employers with college students and recent graduates with disabilities. Through WRP, job seekers can pursue opportunities to attain summer internships and permanent positions in the Federal government that match their talents and skills.

# 5   Is hiring for disability affirmative action?

Hiring disabled individuals is considered affirmative action and it is not only protected, it is required of Federal agencies. More specifically, Section 501 and Section 503 of the Rehabilitation Act require Federal agencies to establish affirmative action plans for hiring and advancing disabled individuals in the Federal workforce. It's important to note that the focus of disability hiring initiatives is not to give preferential treatment to individuals with disabilities, but to create equal opportunities and provide reasonable accommodations when necessary.

## SEC. 791. [SECTION 501]

*(b) Federal agencies; affirmative action program plans*

*Each department, agency, and instrumentality (including the United States Postal Service and the Postal Regulatory Commission) in the executive branch and the Smithsonian Institution shall, within one hundred and eighty days after September 26, 1973, submit to the Commission and to the Committee an affirmative action program plan for the hiring, placement, and advancement of individuals with disabilities in such department, agency, instrumentality, or Institution. Such a plan shall include a description of the extent to which and methods whereby the special needs of employees who are individuals with disabilities are being met. Such plan shall be updated annually, and shall be reviewed annually and approved by the Commission, if the Commission determines, after consultation with the Committee, that such plan provides sufficient assurances, procedures and commitments to provide adequate hiring, placement, and advancement opportunities for individuals with disabilities.*

# 6 What are the risks if you do nothing?

While there are many compelling reasons to inspire Federal agencies to invest in neuroinclusion in their agencies to support their workforce, the risks inherent in not establishing neurodiversity initiatives are just as compelling.

## Untapped talent pool

This can result in missed opportunities to benefit from the unique skills and talents of neurodivergent individuals, hindering innovation and problem-solving. Furthermore, it increases the time job roles are left vacant, increasing the workload of other employees and slowing the pace at which tasks are completed. The absence of proactive neuroinclusive hiring and support practices and initiatives perpetuates underrepresentation, hinders efficient talent acquisition, and can lead to increased turnover among neurodivergent employees.

## Risk of non-compliance with mandates and executive orders

More critically, not being proactive in creating equal employment opportunities for neurodivergent people may put you at risk of non-compliance with legal obligations and addressing executive orders calling for representation.

## Falling behind other nations as "the model employer"

Federal agencies aspire to be the model employer to other employers within the U.S. and worldwide. To live up to this vision, it is critical to be proactive in addressing barriers to employment for neurodivergent people and creating leading neuroinclusive hiring programs such as those seen in the UK, Australia, and Israel.

# The Planning Phase

U.S. Federal agencies interested in establishing neuroinclusive practices or Neurodiversity@Work hiring initiatives often don't know quite how or where to start. In this section, we suggest a set of actions and considerations to guide your thinking and approach to this important work. Lessons learned and best practices discussed in this chapter were identified by leading private firms and a few Federal agencies that have successfully launched and sustained neurodiversity initiatives in the U.S. This chapter also draws on the experience of three leading Neurodiversity@Work external partners who have supported several public and private employers over the years. These guidelines are not meant to be exhaustive; rather, they illustrate key decisions and considerations to guide your agency's thinking and design throughout the planning phase of your initiative.

To effectively plan your initiative, consider the following *key stages and their related questions* to guide your efforts:

**1. Strategic planning: Why are we doing this?**

    1.1. How does this initiative align with our strategy?

    1.2. Beyond mandates, why are we doing this? How does neuroinclusion meet our agency's needs?

    1.3. How does neuroinclusion fit our culture and values?

    1.4. How does a neuroinclusive workplace advance our agency's goals and benefit our people?

**2. How do we make the business case?**

    2.1. What is the significance of the business case?

    2.2. What are the elements of the business case?

    2.3. How do I make the business case?

**3. Stakeholder engagement and support: Who can help?**

    3.1. What organizational sponsorship is necessary and why?

    3.2. What existing internal entities and resources can help us?

    3.3. How do we partner with neurodistinct advocates and allies in our organization?

    3.4. What initiatives and people exist within the Federal Government that we can learn from?

    3.5. How can we leverage external expertise?

**4. Assessment and implementation roadmap: Where do we start?**

    4.1. Assessment: What are our current strengths that we can leverage? What areas require improvement?

    4.2. Initial scope definition: How do we scope the initiative to propel us to sustainable neuroinclusion?

    4.3. Initiative design: What models of employment are right for our organizations? How do we develop a neuroinclusive culture and practices?

    4.4. Careful planning: What should we consider when planning our initiative? How do we balance an initiative's short-term goals and needs with our agency's long-term goal of neuroinclusion?

    4.5. Pilot execution: What does a pilot look like? How do we learn from and iterate on our pilot?

**5. Sustainability and growth: What does success look like?**

    5.1. How do we measure our progress and impact?

    5.2. What are the KPIs?

    5.3. How do we support the development of candidates hired through the initiative and their managers?

    5.4. How do we iterate and grow the initiative?

    5.5. How do we communicate our success?

# PLANNING CHECKLIST

☐ Define our initiative's value proposition

☐ Align with our agency's values and strategies

☐ Ground our initiative in relevant Federal directives

☐ Secure executive sponsorship

☐ Partner with neurodivergent advocates in your agency

☐ Build a coalition of champions across key functional areas within our agency

☐ Form an internal working group, including neurodivergent advocates

☐ Communicate our end game and desired outcome

☐ Develop the right internal and external partnerships

☐ Get buy-in and headcount from unit leaders

☐ Start small and iterate

☐ Identify the managers and teams to start

☐ Identify the roles where we can provide meaningful work

☐ Identify our talent pipeline and sourcing partners

☐ Allocate people and resources to execute initiative activities

## 1 Strategic planning: Why are we doing this?

When embarking on the journey of neurodiversity hiring, the first step for any agency is to be clear about why you are motivated to launch a Neurodiversity@Work initiative and how the initiative aligns with the agency's core missions. As discussed in Chapter 1, numerous Federal policies not only encourage but mandate the creation of neuroinclusive employment practices, serving as the foundation for what could evolve into a transformative organizational endeavor with far-reaching implications. Delving into the reasons behind the adoption of neuroinclusive strategies (including but not limited to hiring programs) requires agencies to engage in a thorough examination of their motivations.

To become clear on your goals for your initiative, you must be able to answer the following *key questions* clearly:

▶ **1. How does this initiative align with our agency's strategy?**

▶ **2. Beyond mandates, why are we doing this? How do neuroinclusion initiatives meet our agency's needs?**

▶ **3. How does neuroinclusion fit our culture and values?**

▶ **4. How does a neuroinclusive workplace advance our agency's goals and benefit our people?**

To address these fundamental questions about why your agency should invest in neuroinclusion, it's instrumental to draw inspiration from both governmental agencies and private entities that have pioneered and successfully expanded neurodiversity initiatives.

"

*We learned very quickly that for the initiative to succeed, it had to meet our company needs and fit our culture and values.*

*— private firm champion*

Private firms highlight a spectrum of motivations, including:

- Addressing workforce talent gaps

- Enhancing service to neurodivergent employees already working in the agency and their customers

- Fostering positive social impact through job creation

- A desire to be a leader in workplace transformation in their industry

- Improved brand recognition as an inclusive employer

- An organizational culture and values that support equal opportunity employment and accessibility

- Delivering inclusive services due to improved representation of their clients or customers within their workforce

- Increased cognitive diversity, which improves creativity, problem-solving, productivity, and innovation

- Positive spillover effects from manager training

Central to these initiatives is the shared belief in the value of cognitive diversity to spur innovation, problem-solving, and overall productivity, encapsulated by the ethos "A rising tide lifts all boats."

Leading Federal agencies emphasize the importance of aligning the reasons for developing neuroinclusive initiatives with an agency's strategy, culture, and values. They recognize the strategic, moral, legal, and societal imperatives of neurodiversity initiatives. Chapter 3 on the business case will provide more on this topic.

## BEYOND MANDATES

Federal agencies that have been successful at launching neuroinclusion initiatives went beyond "compliance with mandates" to ensure their initiatives were strategic and sustainable. They cite reasons similar to private sector employers, focusing on:

- ☑ The desire to be a model employer, aligning with Federal aspirations and mandates

- ☑ The need to compete with other leading nations by serving neurodivergent people and leveraging cognitive diversity for innovation and productivity

- ☑ The need to represent the interest of the public by providing equal opportunity to the entire population

- ☑ The desire to serve, retain, and advance neurodivergent employees in their current workforce and advance accommodations more meaningfully and holistically

- ☑ The need to meet critical talent gaps where job openings remain vacant

- ☑ Improving their agency's overall employee engagement, productivity, and retention

- ☑ Seeing the effort as a key strategic investment in preparing for critical industry trends (e.g., AI, cybersecurity)

"

*One [initiative] that was really untapped was addressing the challenges that neurodivergent individuals have in our agency. We have a focus on the deaf and hard of hearing. We have a focus on the wounded warrior. We have a variety of focus areas, but there was not anything for neurodivergent people. So under that people goal and what we were learning about advantages [neurodivergent people contribute] toward our mission, we saw a clear line to that agency goal.*

*– Federal agency champion*

# 2 Building the business case

Constructing a business case is an essential step in articulating the rationale and potential benefits of your neuroinclusion initiative, beyond mandates. It serves as a structured argument designed to convince stakeholders of the value and viability of your proposal. You should have a clearly articulated business case to secure and sustain executive support. To begin articulating your business case, you must know the answer to the following *key questions*:

▶ **1. What is the significance of the business case?**

▶ **2. What are the elements of the business case?**

▶ **3. How do I make the business case?**

The business case offers a persuasive evidence-based foundation to garner support, secure funding, and facilitate informed decision-making. The business case must include current needs and future needs and opportunities.

> ❝
> *We were trying to figure out a way to harness that potential, not only with our current workforce, but the future workforce if we were able to hire individuals.*
>
> — *Federal agency champion*

## BUILD YOUR CASE

To construct a business case, leading private organizations and Federal agencies suggest that you:

☑ Clearly articulate how your initiative's value proposition aligns with your organization's values, culture, strategy, and KPIs.

☑ Present a clear, concise, and compelling narrative that outlines the objectives, strategies, and anticipated outcomes relevant to KPIs.

☑ Determine the expected initiative costs.

☑ Estimate the return on investment (ROI).

The goal is to provide a comprehensive analysis that not only highlights your initiative's alignment with the agency's goals, but also addresses potential challenges and proposes solutions and risk mitigation strategies.

Make sure you:

✓ Refer to success cases from sources such as the Neurodiversity@Work Employer Roundtable to support your case.

✓ Refer to success cases from other agencies, detailed in Chapter 1.

✓ Test your business case on an internal audience of enthusiasts.

✓ Refine your business case as needed.

We will address the development of the business case in more detail in Chapter 3.

> ❝
> *When you develop your business case, speak to your organization's values and KPIs.*
>
> — *private organization champion*

# 3 Stakeholder engagement and support: Who can help?

Although Neurodiversity@Work initiatives may be initiated from any level within an organization, they require commitment and support from internal and external parties to ensure successful execution. To establish the necessary internal and external partnerships:

✓ Secure executive sponsorship

✓ Partner with neurodivergent advocates and allies within your agency

✓ Identify the right program leader or leaders

✓ Secure support from department heads and hiring managers

✓ Build a coalition of internal units

✓ Tap into the Neurodiversity@Work Employer Roundtable to learn and share best practices

✓ Identify community and Federal resources to support your initiative

✓ Select external partners who understand your needs, values, and culture and are willing to adapt to them

Below, we detail how to approach building relationships with internal and external partners strategically and with intentionality to address the *following key questions*:
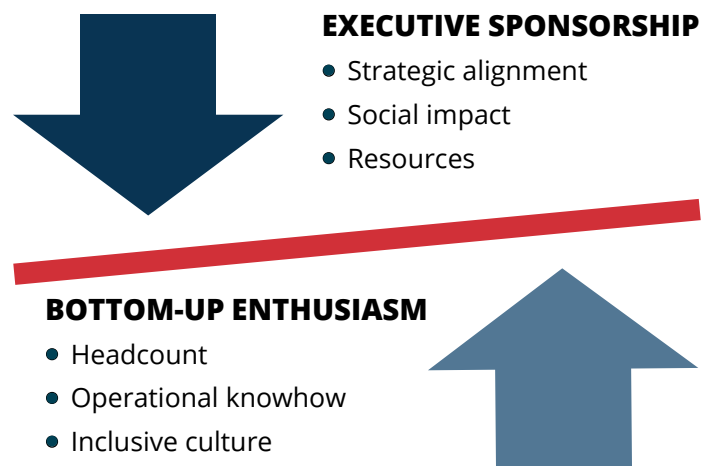
▶ 1. What organizational sponsorship is necessary and why?

▶ 2. What existing internal entities and resources can help us?

▶ 3. How do we partner with neurodistinct advocates and allies in our organization?

▶ 4. What initiatives and people exist within the Federal Government that we can learn from and leverage?

▶ 5. How can we leverage external expertise?

## 3.1. What organizational sponsorship is necessary and why?

Executive sponsorship is vital, as it ensures the initiative has the necessary strategic direction, resources, and visibility. It's essential to select executives who value neuroinclusion and have the influence to integrate the initiative into the agency's overall strategy, meeting both its immediate needs and long-term objectives. While executives who believe in the importance of the inclusion of neurodivergent people are critical, it is also imperative that you make clear the strategic alignment that grounds your initiative in your agency's needs and objectives (strategic and operational). This requires an explicit and well-articulated business case.

Look for executives who:

✓ Understand and support the rationale for neuroinclusion

✓ Align with the culture, focus, and scope of your initiative

✓ Have strategic goals closely tied to those of your initiative

✓ Are capable of promoting the initiative throughout the organization

✓ Have the influence to integrate initiative practices in the mainstream structures of the organization

✓ Dedicate the resources needed to successfully launch and sustain the initiative

**EXECUTIVE SPONSORSHIP**
- Strategic alignment
- Social impact
- Resources

**BOTTOM-UP ENTHUSIASM**
- Headcount
- Operational knowhow
- Inclusive culture

*Leading Neurodiversity@Work firms emphasize the importance of support and enthusiasm from the executive as well as the operational levels of the organization. Wide support creates the inclusive culture necessary for the success, scalability, and long-term sustainability of the initiative.*

# 3.2. What existing internal entities and resources can help us?

To ensure the success and scalability of neurodiversity initiatives, it's crucial to have the support of various sponsors and champions throughout your agency, beyond the executive level. This is what organizational change management experts refer to as *building a coalition of champions.* Neurodiversity initiatives thrive with the support of a dedicated coalition that can help shape, operationalize, and integrate them into the agency's standard practices over time.

Building operational-level leadership and a coalition requires three types of champions:

### INITIATIVE LEAD(S) (OFTEN REFERRED TO AS PROGRAM/INITIATIVE MANAGER)

Identify a program leader or leaders who have knowledge and awareness of neuroinclusion in the workplace and have the enthusiasm to make a difference. Initiative leads will have to lead various organizational change activities to design and execute the initiative goals. To this end, it is critical that they have the social capital and knowhow to garner support from unit leaders, hiring managers, and relevant agency functional units.

### DEPARTMENT HEADS AND HIRING MANAGERS

Secure support from department unit leaders and potential hiring managers who can invest in neuroinclusion practices and/or provide job opportunities within their units and be thought leaders alongside you. These leaders are critical to continuous improvement and the initial success of your initiative. Their readiness to engage as partners and thought leaders goes a long way toward establishing sustainable initiatives.

### FUNCTIONAL UNIT LEADS AND STAFF

Build a coalition of partners with internal units relevant to employee recruitment, support, and advancement overall. Units such as Diversity and Inclusion, Accommodations, Legal, Employee Resource Groups, Training and Development, Human

**SPOTLIGHT ON …**

**One agency's neuroinclusion working group:**

"It turned out that the people that raised their hand were at all levels of the organization, from worker bee all the way up to some of the most senior people in our agency. And not only was there vertical diversity in this working group that we pulled together, but there was horizontal diversity. We had people from our general counsel office, people from our diversity and equity office, people from the mission side of the house, people from HR, people from security.

When we started, we probably had 25 people in this ad-hoc working group that we formed, and they turned out to be the most incredible internal resource I could have ever imagined. When we had a recruiting question, we had the HR recruiter right there. When we had a legal question, we had a lawyer, and we didn't have to go through the bureaucracy and be just another email in someone's inbox. We had everybody we needed right there in the room."

— Federal agency champion
(edited for brevity and clarity)

Resources, Communication, and Procurement can play a critical role in informing and supporting neuroinclusive activities.

Agencies that have been successful at launching neuroinclusive initiatives formed a Neuroinclusion Working Group that represents the key functions and units listed above. This group met regularly to assist in the design, development, and execution of program launch activities and long-term initiatives.

## INTERNAL COALITION CHECKLIST

- ☐ Secure executive sponsorship
- ☐ Partner with neurodivergent advocates and allies
- ☐ Identify program leader/champion(s)
- ☐ Build a coalition of internal units
- ☐ Form a working group
- ☐ Secure support from department heads and hiring managers
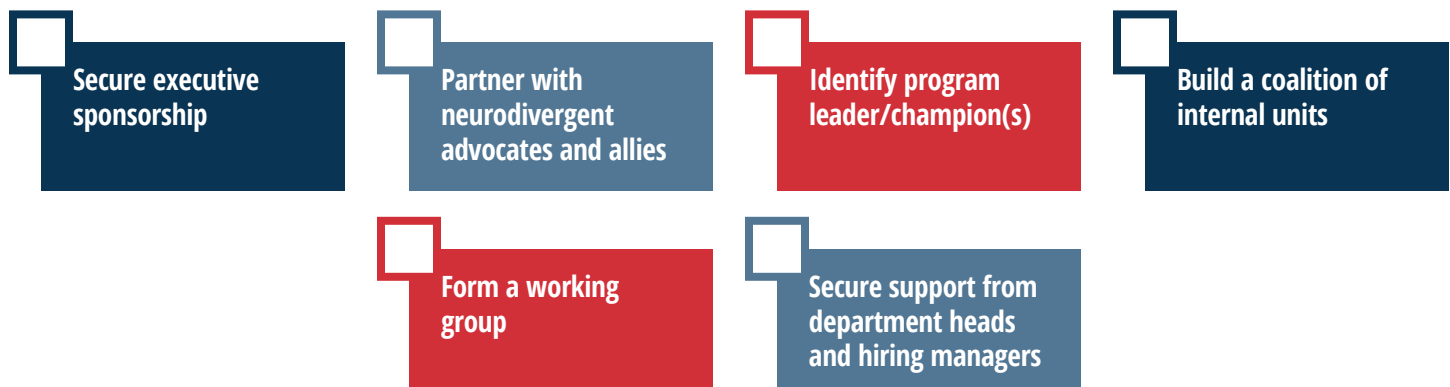
# 3.3. How do we partner with neurodistinct advocates and allies in our organization?

Transforming workplace practices and cultures that were built on neurotypical expectations and preferences requires true authentic leadership from and engagement with neurodivergent communities and advocates in your agency. It is important to engage a diversity of advocates and advocate communities to account for the diversity of experiences within and across neurotypes and intersecting identities. This not only increases the initiative's effectiveness and, therefore, its chances for success, but it also builds trust with the neurodivergent community and goes a long way toward enhancing an agency's overall culture of trust and acceptance.

Partnering with neurodistinct advocates and allies within your organization is key to ensuring the appropriateness and, therefore, inclusivity of your initiatives. Ways to authentically include voices from the neurodiversity community include:

### PARTNERING WITH NEURODIVERGENT VOICES

Actively involve neurodivergent individuals in leadership and planning groups. This could be through existing neurodiversity employee resource groups (ERGs), which provide valuable feedback and support. Embrace the principle of "nothing about us without us" to ensure decisions and designs reflect the needs and insights of those with lived experiences.

### FORMING A NEURODIVERSITY INCLUSION SUB-WORKING GROUP IF NO ERGS EXIST

If your agency does not currently have an ERG, establish a sub-working group dedicated to including diverse voices from neurodistinct communities within the broader initiative working group mentioned in the previous section. This group should focus on gathering insights from neurodivergent individuals about effective practices and areas for improvement within the agency.

### ENGAGING A BROAD RANGE OF ADVOCATES

Whether you identify as neurodivergent, an advocate, or an ally, it's essential to involve a diverse array of advocates

> **"**
>
> *'Nothing About Us Without Us' means that autistic people need to be involved whenever autism is discussed. When non-autistic people make decisions about autism without autistic input, those decisions are usually bad. This makes it harder for us to get by in the world. Decisions about autism need to be made with autistic people. That way, we can make policies that help us live our lives, and teach people how to be understanding and supportive of the autistic community.*
>
> *Source: Autistic Self Advocacy Network*

in the planning and design of neuroinclusion initiatives. Their experiences can shed light on both the challenges and opportunities within your agency, contributing to a more effective and inclusive approach.

### USING AUTHENTIC ENGAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Ensure that neurodivergent advocates are included in leadership roles, consulted during the planning and design phases, and encouraged to provide feedback on initiatives. Provide multiple modes of feedback opportunities, including focus groups, anonymous surveys, and individual meetings if desired. This inclusive approach not only enhances the initiative's effectiveness but also fosters a culture of trust and acceptance throughout the organization.

# 3.4. What initiatives and people exist within the Federal Government that we can learn from and leverage?

In Chapter 1, we outlined various entities you can leverage to support your efforts to advance neuroinclusion in your agency, including:

✓ Hiring authorities in section 2

✓ Key resources you may draw on in section 3

✓ Leading Federal agencies that have successfully launched neuroinclusion initiatives in section 4

Explore the options provided in Chapter 1 to identify relevant agencies and resources. We encourage you to contact entities and agencies of interest and inform your approach by learning from their experiences, best practices, and challenges.

# 3.5. How can we leverage external expertise?

Leading organizations and Federal agencies often rely on a variety of external partners to plan, launch, and sustain their initiatives as they build their internal capacity. As the Neurodiversity@Work movement evolves, so does the landscape of partners and resources your agency may draw on to support and guide your initiative.

Develop partnerships with external experts and service providers who align with your agency's needs and values. Refer to Chapter 4 for an in-depth discussion on identifying and engaging with external partners.

> **A key success factor in building external partnerships is identifying the right partners who understand and are willing to adapt to your organization's needs, values, and culture.**
>
> *– private organization champion*

## EXTERNAL PARTNERS

To gain insights, resources, best practices, and support services, connect with relevant external partners, including:

- ✓ The Neurodiversity@Work Employer Roundtable
- ✓ Federal contractors
- ✓ Community agencies
- ✓ Federal resources
- ✓ Social service providers (also referred to as intermediaries or consultants)
- ✓ Talent platforms
- ✓ Schools
- ✓ Universities

## LESSONS LEARNED: WHO CAN HELP?

### 1. Executive buy-in is crucial.

- Identify the right executives who will be supportive and have the influence to get others to support the initiative as well.
- The executive champion must be visible in their support, such as attending group working meetings.
- Be prepared with your business case and tailor it to your target executive.
- When making the business case, balance your emphasis on Executive orders and mandates with agency goals and values.

### 2. Partnerships are crucial to success.

- Ensure your initiative's internal working group represents a diversity of units across the agency. The makeup of the group and the individuals' passion is critical to success.
- Reach out for help. There's a community of resources available and people happy to assist.
- Take time to learn about the available resources and develop relationships.
- Work closely with HR and Legal to understand the broader context of employment.
- Reach out to diversity & inclusion officers and build a great partnership with them.
- Learn from firms that have established Neurodiversity@Work initiatives.
- Invest in an external partner to get things off the ground if you think it is necessary.
- Look for partners that are willing to work with you and adapt to your culture and needs for the best results.
- Building your talent pipeline is critical! Find the right sourcing partners.
- Own your recruiting function.
- Be thoughtful about what to own and what to outsource.

*Note: Lessons learned are in the words of initiative staff.*

# 4 Assessment and implementation roadmap: Where do we start?

Becoming a neuroinclusive agency requires time, reflection, self-assessment, and deliberate decision-making to identify the course of action consistent with your agency's culture and norms. To get started, we propose a five-step roadmap: assessment, initial scope definition, initiative design, careful planning, and pilot execution. This section will detail key activities and considerations for each step. Appendix B provides a template project plan and timeline to illustrate potential duration and overlap of these stages.

▶ **1. Assessment**
- What are our current strengths that we can leverage?
- What areas require improvement?

▶ **2. Initial scope definition**
- How do we scope the initiative initially?
- How does our initial scope propel us to sustainable neuroinclusion?

▶ **3. Initiative design**
- What models of employment are right for our organization?
- How do we develop a neuroinclusive culture and practices?

▶ **4. Careful planning**
- What should we consider when planning our initiative?
- How do we balance an initiative's short-term goals and needs with our agency's long-term goal of neuroinclusion?

▶ **5. Pilot execution**
- What does a pilot look like?
- How do we learn from and iterate on our pilot?

## 4.1. Assessment

The assessment phase is the cornerstone of your agency's neuroinclusion foundation. It is a reflective process that aligns your neurodiversity initiatives with the core mission, culture, and values of your agency to ensure a strategic fit and long-term sustainability. To begin this self-assessment process, there are *three key questions* for you to consider:

1. **What criteria and resources can we use to carry out our self-assessment?**

2. **What are our current strengths that we can leverage?**

3. **What areas require improvement?**

Identifying your current strengths enables your team to build on existing capabilities and resources you already have.

✓ Do you have a disability- and/or neurodivergence-focused employee resource group?

✓ What is the engagement and satisfaction level of current employees?

✓ Does leadership hold "town halls"? Do leaders send out clear and relevant communications in multiple formats? Are agendas and materials distributed in advance of meetings?

### SET YOUR GOALS

Assessment goals include:

☑ Enhanced neuroinclusion. Employees feel seen, heard, and supported.

☑ Improved communication. Open lines of communication ensure employees are well-informed, engaged, and can voice their concerns and feedback.

☑ Clear accessibility and accommodations in work practices. These improve the workplace to make it accessible for everyone.

✓ Is there a culture of positive and negative feedback outside of an annual review?

✓ Do you use closed captioning during online meetings?

✓ Is it relatively easy to obtain reasonable accommodations?

A good place to start your assessment is by conducting internal surveys and focus groups that include a diverse range of employees, including those who have disclosed their neurodivergence. An external partner may be able to help your agency collect anonymous feedback and benchmark against best practices.

Every agency has elements of its culture, practices, and policies that could be improved. Brainstorm with your team to think about potential gaps, and then reflect upon whether the discovered gaps could hinder your ability to run a successful pilot. Create SMART (specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound) goals to address the gaps.

The insights your team gains from the assessment will ensure the scope of your neurodiversity inclusion initiative is both aligned with your agency's goals and contributes to a neuroinclusive culture.

# 4.2. Initial scope definition

As you define your strategy and execution plans for becoming the model employer for a neuroinclusive workplace, it is important to balance your long-term vision with actionable short-term steps. Modularity is OK; you don't have to create it all at once. As you design your approach for neuroinclusion, keep two *key questions* in mind:

1. **How do we scope the initiative initially?**

2. **How does our initial scope propel us to sustainable neuroinclusion?**

Leading Neurodiversity@Work organizations emphasize the importance of scoping the initiative carefully and starting with a small pilot initiative. These pilots can begin from two vantage points, and we encourage organizations to consider both:

*The inside-out approach* involves making the workplace neuroinclusive from the vantage point of existing neurodiverse employees, assessing and transforming current culture and mainstream processes, and providing more holistic support for neurodistinct individuals.

*The outside-in approach* involves establishing a new hiring initiative that changes processes for incoming employees. It's launched as a pilot that can adapt according to organizational needs to inform overall organizational practices over time (often referred to as the Lighthouse Model or Neurodiversity Hiring Program).

*Neurodivergent candidates have a diversity of talents and interests. Do not pigeonhole your neurodivergent hires into a limited set of roles. Any role in your organization can be staffed with a neurodivergent employee who has the skills and interests to fulfill that role. The key is to create the right environment for them.*

*To get started, we suggest that you pick a few roles that are in high demand at your organization in order to increase support from hiring managers and design neuroinclusive processes well. What you learn from the initial phase can later be translated to any role.*

# SCOPING CHECKLIST

Regardless of your approach, scoping the initiative involves:

- ☐ **Identify your greatest areas of need, either for talent or neuroinclusion**
- ☐ **Identify the right processes and/or roles for a pilot initiative**
- ☐ **Decide on the size of the group to pilot the initiative**
- ☐ **Determine where (geographically and in which business units) to start**
- ☐ **Identify the right external partners**
- ☐ **Decide how fast to grow and in what fashion**
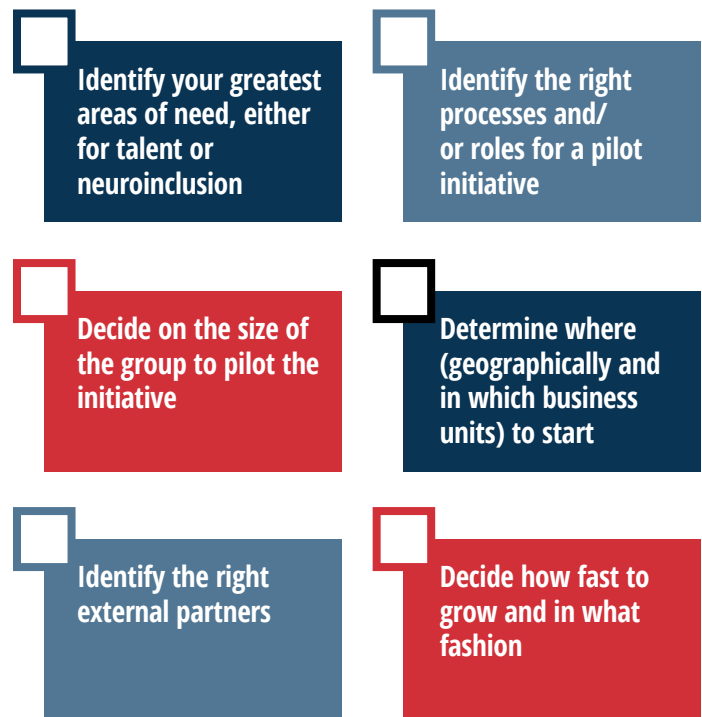
> "
> *If it's annoying to a neurotypical, it'll break a neurodivergent person.*
>
> — *a leading service provider*

Scoping your initiative is important as you design and refine your recruitment, interview, selection, onboarding, development, and advancement practices. Limiting the number of locations, divisions, roles, and size of your initial pilot group provides the flexibility to be responsive and adapt your practices when necessary.

While virtual collaboration is possible, it still might be critical to determine the specific location to start your initiative. Select a location where there is:

✓ Internal support from department leaders

✓ Demonstrated support for inclusive practices

✓ Potential for strong partnerships with community providers that will provide support services and source candidates. Increasingly, external partners (service providers) operate in multiple locales.

✓ A group of inclusive managers! Managers are critical partners in the design and execution of Neurodiversity@ Work initiatives. You must identify the right hiring managers who are supportive of the initiative and have the aptitude to learn quickly and champion the initiative.

*Consider clearance issues and sourcing barriers when thinking about external partner vendors and community partners.*

## KEY QUALITIES OF HIRING MANAGERS

Aptitude to adapt and learn quickly

Ability and willingness to collaborate with the initiative and provide feedback

Ability to cultivate an inclusive culture in their team

A demonstrated commitment to diversity and inclusion

Being generally considered an exemplary manager

Openness to support from external partners (e.g., job coaches) when needed

A high level of credibility

*All work should be meaningful. Ensure it evolves as employees develop new skills. Develop employees so they learn new skills and take on new roles. Unless the employee really wants to, do not ask a 5-, 10-, or 15-year veteran employee to do what a new hire is doing. Develop your talent for leadership positions. Your program participants will have accommodations so you are not lowering standards. Understand that some new skills may require additional time to learn as the individual processes a new skill set. Help them move forward.*

— *Federal agency initiative staff*

# SCOPE CONSIDERATIONS

<table>
<tr>
<td><strong>Where do we start?</strong></td>
<td>

- ✓ Consider leveraging existing Federal resources (see Appendix A).
- ✓ Understand the potential/options for short-term initiation and long-term growth.
- ✓ Consider locations that have a network of internal and external partners that will provide the needed support.
- ✓ Consider locations and units that foster a welcoming culture — make sure to ask your current neurodivergent employees.
- ✓ Consider locations that will tap into a robust local talent pool or that will be able to attract a talent pool.
- ✓ Ask your neurodivergent employees what skills and training they believe pilot team members and managers should have.
- ✓ Consider how many variations in recruitment, interview, selection, and onboarding activities you have the resources to offer in the initial phase.

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<tr>
<td>LIGHTHOUSE MODEL:<br><strong>What roles are best to start? And how many?</strong></td>
<td>

- ✓ Provide meaningful work, focusing on strengths and interests.
- ✓ Focus on roles where there is a need for talent to strengthen your business case (think about skills gaps, high turnover roles, future talent needs).
- ✓ Where you have identified initiative enthusiasts, look for potential roles under their management.
- ✓ Reimagine roles based on existing and future team requirements.
- ✓ Redesign roles so that individuals are doing tasks most aligned with their skill level and interest to maximize motivation and engagement.
- ✓ Consider your potential talent pool and its skill set with a growth mindset for long-term advancement.
- ✓ Determine the initial number of roles you aim to fill based on your capacity to provide support, accommodations, and the right work environment.
- ✓ Learn about where other firms and agencies started and were successful.
- ✓ Create a feedback loop so future departments can learn from your successes and challenges.

</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>How many hires do we include in our first pilot group?</strong></td>
<td>

- ✓ Determine the size of the first group in relation to the potential talent pool.
- ✓ Determine the capacity of the initiative-dedicated staff. How many teams will you have the capacity to train and support?
- ✓ Consider how you will grow your initiative upon the success of your pilot. What might that mean for how you design and resource your pilot?

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## LESSONS LEARNED: WHERE TO START?

### 1. Start small.

- Do a pilot first, get your feet wet, and iterate.
- Narrow down the scope of the initiative in terms of the roles you choose.
- Modularity is OK. You don't have to create it all at once.
- Document lessons learned from your pilot, and leave enough room to implement changes before the next cohort.

### 2. Start with the right managers.

- Determine the desired characteristics of managers.
- Create a vetting process to identify the right managers.
- Be kind and direct, and listen to managers who want to participate in the initiative.
- Seek feedback from managers and involve them in the design and iterations of the initiative.

### 3. Start with your current neurodivergent employees.

- Partner with and seek feedback from current employees regarding pilot design.
- Seek feedback from your existing neurodiverse workforce to determine which managers worked best with them.
- Get feedback from neurodivergent pilot participants.

*Note: Lessons learned are in the words of initiative staff.*

# 4.3. Initiative design

While it is critical to learn from others' experiences, ***no one size fits all*** for Neurodiversity@Work initiatives. Your initiative must be consistent with your agency's strategy and values and must meet your agency's needs. This is especially important in the initiation phase as you garner organizational support and establish the initiative's credibility.

When making design decisions, ensure you have neurodivergent minds at the table and consider the following questions:

**1. What neuroinclusive initiative model(s) are right for our organizations?**

**2. How do we develop a neuroinclusive culture and practices?**

Agencies and private firms have utilized various initiative strategies or models to improve neuroinclusion in their workplace. Although there is no single agreed-upon taxonomy or standard to classify these initiatives, we broadly group them into four distinct types (detailed in Chapter 5), including:

- ✓ Neurodiversity@Work hiring programs
- ✓ Centers of excellence
- ✓ Practice for excellence in neuroinclusion
- ✓ Neuroinclusive business process transformation

## PROGRAM DESIGN

Processes, divisions, or roles

Activities

Training for managers and teams

Number of units or processes, or cohort size

Employee support and advancement

Partnerships

Initiative staff structure

To determine which program model or combination of models' strategies are suitable for your agency, you must decide how to:

- Select or combine initiative models/strategies that are most suitable to your goals and your agency's culture and values.

- Leverage internal and external resources (Appendix A), initially and as you scale.

- Own initiative functions that are key to the quality of your initiative and the hires you make, and that are core to your agency's values and culture.

- Pick external partners who understand your goals and values and are willing to adapt.

- Design your initiative selection, interview, and training activities to ensure the quality of hires and advancement of your goals.

- Include training for managers and team members to improve acceptance of neurodiversity and provide actionable collaboration practices for the team.

- Provide dedicated FTE staff to champion the initiative and provide the needed support for neurodivergent employees, managers, and teammates.

- Develop clear, specific neuroinclusive processes for recruitment and onboarding to ensure the quality of hires and advancement of your goals.

- Design for the ability to retain, develop, and promote your agency's existing neurodivergent talent as well as those you have brought on through the initiative.

To ensure the sustainability and scalability of your initiative, design for short-term needs with consideration for long-term growth. Consider your initiative as a pathway to broad agency-wide neuroinclusion and normalization of supports.

## NEUROINCLUSIVE CULTURE

Developing a neuroinclusive culture within a Federal agency requires deliberate planning and action. Here are six actions to consider:

- ☑ Clearly articulate why neuroinclusion matters to your agency.

- ☑ Have leadership make a public commitment to understanding, valuing, and leveraging the strengths of neurodivergent individuals. Align this with the focus of your training.

- ☑ Conduct a campaign for employee education and awareness. Include benefits and challenges, and encourage open dialogue and learning.

- ☑ Review and revise existing policies and practices to remove barriers that might hinder the inclusion of neurodivergent individuals in processes such as recruitment and performance evaluations.

- ☑ Create or enhance support systems within the agency, including mentorship programs, neurodiversity employee resource groups (ERGs), and peer networks.

- ☑ Create a culture of feedback and assessments to make ongoing adjustments to strategies, policies, and practices, ensuring the agency remains a welcoming and supportive environment for all employees.

For more detailed information on building inclusive culture, refer to the Neurodiversity@Work Playbook: Employee Engagement & Growth Series. In Chapters 6, 7, 9, and 10, we review neuroinclusive practices.

## LESSONS LEARNED: DESIGN CONSIDERATIONS

### 1. "Nothing about us without us."

- Spend time with internal and external partners from the autism community to guide your program design.
- Learn about your local autism community's resources, needs, and preferences.
- Reach out to your existing neurodivergent employees and get their perspective.

### 2. Build credibility and capacity.

- Learn about your local neurodiverse community's resources, needs, and preferences.
- Consider organizing an informal working group, lunch discussions, or forums for advocates and allies for input. Be mindful of your agency's requirements for convening any such forum.

### 3. Be intentional about what to own and what to outsource.

- Use the right partners for the right aspects of the initiative.
- Be intentional about how to leverage your internal and external resources.
- Own your recruiting function.
- You will know what your needs are better than any outside source. Ensure you are getting the talent your mission demands.

### 4. Customize your initiative to fit your agency.

- Dedicate sufficient resources and focused attention to design an initiative that works for your organization.
- Be prepared to spend the time, effort, and energy to elicit feedback from internal and external partners.

### 5. When designing your initiative, avoid assumptions.

- Avoid assumptions about the skills, interests, and needs of neurodiverse individuals. Ask questions!
- There is great diversity in needs, desires, and talents.

*Note: Lessons learned are in the words of initiative staff.*

# 4.4. Careful planning

Launching a neurodiversity hiring initiative requires thoughtful planning and considerable coordination. Aside from the usual logistical concerns when creating any hiring or training operation (e.g., vendor management, travel, supplies, space), the initiative requires coordinating with and learning from multiple internal and external partners.

Consider the following questions:

**1. What should we consider when planning our initiative?**

**2. How do we balance an initiative's short-term goals and needs with our agency's long-term goal of neuroinclusion?**

> **Be proactive instead of reactive. Envision and plan for best-case and worst-case scenarios ahead of time in order to have the appropriate response and avoid being caught off-guard."**
>
> — *private firm program lead*

# PLANNING CONSIDERATIONS

**Set clear expectations**

- ✓ Understand the RFP process when developing partnerships.
- ✓ Determine the role each partner will play in each initiative activity.
- ✓ Communicate your expectations to each partner.
- ✓ Be specific about the time commitment, communication expectations, and desired outcomes.

**Determine the needs of participating teams**

- ✓ Get a commitment from business unit leaders regarding headcount or the range of processes to transform.
- ✓ Clearly define the skill set needed for each role.
- ✓ Clearly communicate your expectations regarding how hiring teams and managers will be involved (refer to Chapter 7, "Interview and Selection Process").

**Plan logistics carefully**

- ✓ When job candidates travel, take into account the needs and preferences of the candidates.
- ✓ Preferences will change from person to person and over time. Work with your reasonable accommodations office, EAP (employee assistance program), and external resources to craft alternatives and success enablers.
- ✓ Be specific when planning and communicating building access and other logistics with candidates and external partners.
- ✓ Find physical space that is suitable for initiative activities, candidate needs, and accessibility to all internal and external partners — especially when clearance is concerned.
- ✓ Provide specific instructions to candidates regarding all interview activities and logistics.

**Develop an explicit communication plan**

- ✓ Develop an internal and external communication plan.
- ✓ Stick to the message.
- ✓ Share your communication plan with internal and external team members during pilot, launch activities, and ensuing press coverage.
- ✓ Provide your partners and candidates with the right level of guidance in communication.

**Plan for the unexpected**

- ✓ Plan for best- and worst-case scenarios and develop specific response plans accordingly.
- ✓ Provide backup staff, slack in your resources, and planned downtime.
- ✓ Explain as much as possible upfront to reduce uncertainty and anxiety.
- ✓ Develop a clear communication plan to respond to candidates' questions and reactions to hiring decisions.
- ✓ Communicate your plan to your entire team and make sure your roles are explicitly defined.

# 4.5. Pilot execution

Most established organizations and agencies began with a small hiring program pilot, including four to 10 members in a cohort. Each of the leading organizations concentrated on a few key roles in one geographic location. Pilots allow organizations and agencies to improve initiative design; therefore, it is important to be flexible and adaptable during the pilot. All leading organizations and agencies adapted and changed their models during the pilot phase and continue to do so as they mature and learn. This is a relatively new area of practice that requires curiosity, adaptability, and humility.

Expect to iterate during your first few cohorts on role(s) selection and design as well as process transformation phases. Iterations will become more minor as you learn what is effective for your agency. Refinements will be more limited in scope and complexity as your initiative matures. However, recognize that you will modify the initiative curriculum and processes as you expand the scope of your initiative. Participate in the Neurodiversity@Work Employer Roundtable, the Neurodiversity@Work Summit, and local neurodiversity hubs to learn from other organizations.

## PILOT PROGRAM STRATEGIES

☑ Ask for expected accommodation needs from candidates and hiring teams in advance.

☑ Be responsive to the needs of candidates and hiring team members in real time as needs change.

☑ Build in debrief time and mechanisms to adapt quickly during pilot activities.

☑ Provide meaningful work and do not compromise on the quality of hires.

☑ When adaptations are made, make sure to communicate them to your team and partners.

☑ Involve current employees, hiring managers, partners, and candidates and seek their feedback.

☑ Document and communicate lessons learned and things to avoid regularly (daily if possible and at key milestones).

## LESSONS LEARNED: PLANNING YOUR PILOT

### 1. Be explicit and specific.

- Be explicit about what you expect from managers and teams.
- Be specific about the time commitment and all logistics. Do not take things for granted.
- Be explicit and clarify the type of role available and the skill set needed for each role and team.
- Success is contingent on the right person being placed in the right role throughout their career.

### 2. Be flexible and expect to iterate.

- Understand that there is no "one size fits all."
- To improve collaboration and commitment, involve existing neurodivergent employees, recruiting and hiring managers, the diversity office, reasonable accommodations, security, and others in iterating the program.
- Don't be afraid to fail. There will be things you don't get right initially. Be prepared for trial and error.

### 3. Hope for the best, prepare for the unexpected.

- Be proactive instead of reactive.
- Envision and plan for best-case and worst-case scenarios ahead of time in order to have the appropriate response and avoid being caught off-guard.
- Candidates and managers will have different needs and reactions to decisions. You are more likely to respond productively if you are prepared for multiple scenarios. Game plan scenarios, run fire drills, and make sure your team practices these.
- Communicate successes along the way.
- Manage expectations upfront and often.

*Note: Lessons learned are in the words of initiative staff.*

# 5 Sustainability and growth: What does success look like?

In general, leading Neurodiversity@Work organizations and agencies emphasize a long-term view of success. However, successful Neurodiversity@Work initiatives may look different across organizations and agencies. Leading organizations emphasize the importance of defining success based on your organization's strategy and values and overall inclusion practices. Below is a set of guiding questions to consider:

▶ **1. How do we measure our progress and impact? What are the KPIs?**

▶ **2. How do we grow our initiative?**

▶ **3. How do we communicate our strategy and success?**

## 5.1. How do we measure our progress and impact (KPIs)?

A combination of factors may influence your agency's definition of success and, therefore, how you measure success. Your success metrics may include:

- Compliance indicators specific to key Federal mandates.

- Internal and external assessments of targeted descriptors to meet the model employer goal laid out by the Office of Personnel Management.

- Types of roles offered, wages, promotions, and employee satisfaction and well-being (NIOSH Worker Well-Being Questionnaire). These factors indicate whether you are creating meaningful employment opportunities for the neurodivergent community that align with agency needs.

- Number of qualified applicants, hires, and offer-to-yield ratios — indicators of whether you are finding and hiring needed talent.

- DEI Measures (generational, gender, neurodiversity, race, etc.). These address whether you are attracting a diversity of people, representative of demographic changes in the overall workforce.

- Measures of employee engagement and satisfaction (Disability Equality Index). These indicate whether you are building an organizational culture that is welcoming of disabled people more broadly.

- Executive and employee feedback. Is the initiative providing value to your organization that is recognized by executives and the organization at large?

- Sustainability and growth metrics of hires and the resources dedicated to the initiative. Is it satisfying the organization's needs in a sustainable way?

It is imperative for Federal agencies to develop effective key performance indicators (KPIs) to enable them to track the success of their neuroinclusion program, make informed decisions, and demonstrate the value of investing in neurodiversity inclusion for internal and external stakeholders.

## MEASURE SUCCESS SYSTEMATICALLY



- Define the neuroinclusion program's objectives
- Ensure the KPIs are SMART* goals, relative to objectives
- Measure direct and indirect outcomes
- Establish baseline data
- Set up data collection mechanisms
- Continuously track progress
- Communicate results
- Review and refine KPIs

*\* SMART goals are specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time-bound*

# 5.2. How do we iterate and grow the initiative?

Neurodiversity@Work initiatives are still relatively new. Leading organizations continue to grow, evolve, and examine new possibilities. As the programs mature and their workers progress, new opportunities, questions and challenges arise. Leading organizations grapple with questions regarding growth, retention, and development of employees.

As you design your initiative, consider these questions to guide your initial scoping and lay the foundation for your growth over time:

● How do we make this initiative/program scale up and scale down?

● How and when do we integrate best practices into mainstream processes?

● What functions do we want to live in our organization's mainstream processes and what do we want to keep specialized?

● What functions and activities make sense to outsource permanently?

● Is it more feasible to offload the training permanently, or should the agency invest in building and iterating on an internal training program?

# 5.3. How do we communicate our strategy and success?

During the planning phase, it is critical that you craft a communication strategy that shares your initiative's goals as well as successes. Leading organizations and agencies experienced increased support and demand for the initiative as a result of their communication strategy.

Share your communication plan with internal and external team members during the pilot, launch activities, and ensuing press coverage.

## HOW FREQUENTLY DO WE TELL OUR STORY?

Initiative leaders should update their internal and external stakeholders based on the program's stage, level of interest, and impact on employees. These updates should be aligned with the agency's communication strategy. Communicate important changes or significant milestones as they occur, and use quarterly updates for progress reports, including achievements, challenges, and future plans.

## DEVELOP AN EXPLICIT COMMUNICATION PLAN

☑ Define the purpose of the communication plan.

☑ Develop a framework for proactive messaging and reactive responses by defining the range of possible scenarios you need to communicate about.

☑ Identify your target audiences, both internal and external.

☑ Develop clear and succinct messaging, especially about your value proposition.

☑ Identify the various channels to use for communicating your message.

☑ Identify when and how frequently you will communicate your message and tell your success stories. Align your messaging with initiative stages and milestones.

☑ Make communication roles explicit for internal and external partners. Who will communicate what, when, and how?

# HOW DO WE SHARE OUR VALUE PROPOSITION SUCCINCTLY?

| ☐ **Identify stakeholders' needs** | ☐ **Highlight what makes this neuroinclusion initiative unique and effective** | ☐ **Ensure it is easily understood and does not use jargon** | ☐ **Emphasize the benefits of the neuroinclusion program** | ☐ **Use evidence to support your value proposition** |

The sustainability and scalability of your initiative are tied to awareness of your successes. It is essential that you document and communicate successes regularly. Success can be tangible (e.g., improved performance, yield on offers) and intangible (e.g., improved inclusive culture, improved management effectiveness).

✓ Be intentional and systematic about measuring and documenting key performance indicators you first outline in your business case.

✓ Follow your communication plan to regularly update members of your coalition and potential new partners throughout your organization.

✓ Use storytelling to communicate success. Success stories will increase support for the initiative and enable you to grow.

✓ Leverage executives and champions to tell your story.

" *Having leaders storytelling about the initiative is especially valuable.*

— *private firm program lead*

## KEY STRATEGIES & CHANNELS

🔑 Regular internal status reports distributed to the organization at large.

🔑 Executive sponsors communicate initiative success and impact that is relevant to organizational strategy and values.

🔑 Social media updates to communicate success stories and new-hire experiences (when appropriate for your agency).

🔑 Use of mass media to communicate initiative impact in order to raise awareness in the community at large.

🔑 Internal communication by initiative champions from departments, lending credibility to the initiative's impact.

# The Business Case

To successfully develop and launch a Neurodiversity@Work initiative, it is critical to make the business case for how such an initiative will help your agency. This chapter provides a synthesis of how leading Neurodiversity@Work agencies and private organizations developed their business case as well as some best practices they identified along the way. Please note that some of the content below will repeat and elaborate on content from Chapter 1.

To develop the business case, you must address the following *four key questions*:

▶ **1. What is the value proposition of our neurodiversity initiative?**
- How does this fit and add to our culture, people, and values?
- How does this align with our strategy?
- What agency risks might it help mitigate?
- What Federal directives support neuroinclusion initiatives?

▶ **2. How can we make our case?**
- What information can I reference to support our case?
- How do we frame our case to speak to different audiences?

▶ **3. What are the costs of the initiative and return on investment (ROI)?**
- What resources are needed to establish the initiative?
- What is the ROI? What are the costs vs. impact (direct and indirect)?
- What existing functions and resources can I draw on to reduce costs?

▶ **4. How can we strengthen our business case?**
- Who is the best audience to provide feedback?
- How much do we expect to refine our case?

> " *Make the business case about more than the hard numbers so it isn't just checking a box and hiring just to hire.*
>
> — *private firm initiative leader*

## BUSINESS CASE ELEMENTS

Your business case may include the following elements, with some variations unique to the agency's goals, values, and context:

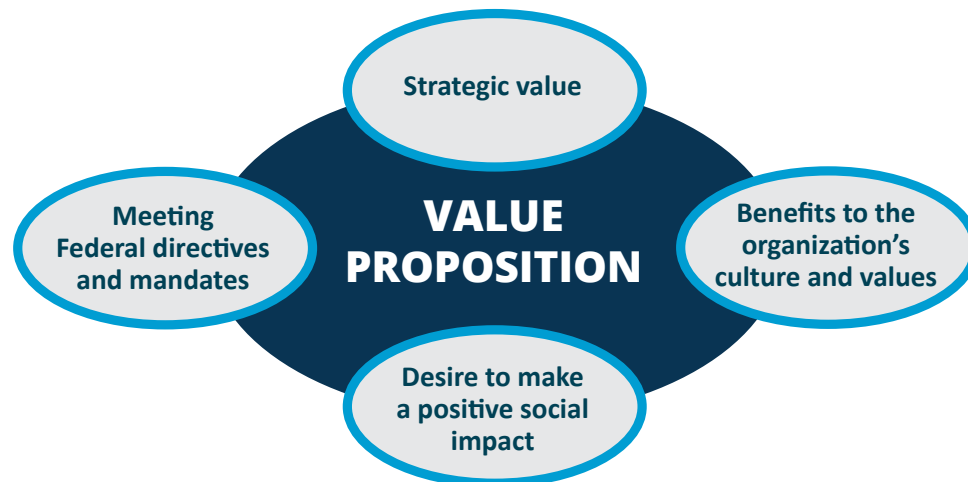| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ☐ Opportunities or challenges your initiative addresses | ☐ Your initiative's relevance to your agency's strategy, culture, and values | ☐ Benefits you anticipate |
| ☐ Possible risks specific to the initiative in the context of your agency | ☐ Initiative scope and design | ☐ Estimated costs of initiative design, execution, and sustainability |
| ☐ Project plan for launch | ☐ Impact on key stakeholders and related operations | ☐ Assessment of your agency's capability to launch and sustain the initiative |

## BUSINESS CASE CHECKLIST

☑ Define your initiative's value proposition

☑ Align with your organization's strategy and values

☑ Determine the cost

☑ Refine the business case to appeal to different audiences

☑ Elicit feedback from enthusiasts

☑ Elicit feedback from neurodivergent advocates

☑ Use examples from organizations and agencies with established initiatives to support your case

# 1 What is the value proposition of our neurodiversity initiative?

In Chapter 1, we discussed that U.S. Federal agencies have various incentives and compliance requirements that help make the business case for neuroinclusion. For one, Federal agencies need to maintain the U.S. lead in innovation and competitiveness. Federal agencies also have the responsibility to improve employment and support of neurodivergent people within their workplaces. This is not only a moral imperative; it is critical to do so to meet the demand for talent and align with the Federal Government's aspiration of becoming a model employer.

Neurodiversity@Work initiatives add great value to organizations that launch them effectively. Leading private organizations and agencies emphasize the importance of using the right measures of return on investment (ROI) that fit your organization's values and culture. They also suggest that you provide a complete and holistic picture of the potential tangible and intangible benefits of the initiative framed under the four types of value below:

Strategic value

Meeting Federal directives and mandates

**VALUE PROPOSITION**

Benefits to the organization's culture and values

Desire to make a positive social impact

# 1.1. Meet Federal directives and mandates

The U.S. Code and various executive orders and initiatives within the Federal Government not only enable the establishment of neurodiversity employment programs and initiatives, but also require and encourage such efforts. Chapter 1 outlines these regulations and directives in greater detail. The list below summarizes Chapter 1, Section 1:
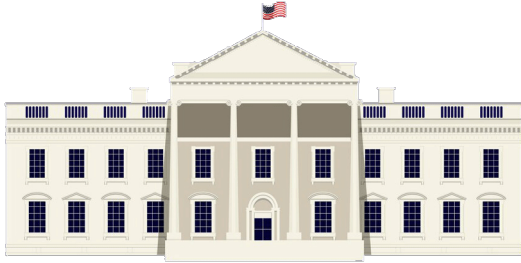
**1.** Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act not only prohibits Federal agencies from discriminating against Federal employees and job applicants with a disability, but also requires Federal agencies to take affirmative action to ensure the equitable representation of disabled individuals in the Federal workforce.

**2.** The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) outlined specific hiring goals for disabled, including neurodistinct, individuals among Federal agencies.

**3.** The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) not only prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all aspects of employment, it also requires employers to provide reasonable accommodations, including neuroinclusive adjustments to qualified disabled individuals to enable them to perform the essential functions of their jobs.

**4.** The Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act requires employers to make reasonable efforts to accommodate any disabilities of returning veterans, including neurodivergent individuals, when disabilities were incurred or aggravated by service.

**5.** Executive Order 14035 states the goal "to advance diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) in the Federal workforce," which aligns with neurodiversity hiring initiatives. Agencies are encouraged to be proactive in removing barriers in several ways discussed in Chapter 1.

**6.** Executive Order 13932 emphasizes merit-based hiring practices to evaluate a candidate's ability to fulfill job roles by reducing the emphasis on educational qualifications, which is often a barrier to neurodivergent candidates, and increasing focus on specific skills and competencies.

**7.** President Biden's 2021 "Memorandum on Revitalizing America's Foreign Policy and National Security Workforce, Institutions, and Partnerships" specifically mentions the need to "improve the ability of the national security workforce to attract and accommodate individuals who have a disability as defined in the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 or a targeted disability as defined in the regulations implementing Section 501 of the Rehabilitation Act." It is important to note that neurodiversity hiring initiatives go beyond national security-related roles and may address almost any area of need.

**8.** The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) strategic plan focuses on "positioning the government as a model employer." Objective 1.1 of the strategic plan establishes a goal of increasing the government-wide Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Index score by 6 percentage points by FY 2026.

# 1.2. Benefits to the organization's culture and values

Leading Neurodiversity@Work private and public organizations experience positive effects on their organizational culture as a result of their Neurodiversity@Work initiatives. As you develop your business case, identify the potential cultural benefits and align them to your agency's culture, values, and diversity and inclusion efforts. This segment of your business case is especially important for garnering support from diversity and inclusion executives and personnel as well as the overall workforce at your agency.

| **Advance diversity and inclusion efforts** | ✓ Neurodiversity@Work initiatives enhance diversity and inclusion efforts around disability and accessibility for employees, partners, customers, and suppliers.<br>✓ The initiatives provide an opportunity to leverage and complement existing diversity and inclusion efforts and align with various directives and guidelines highlighted in the previous section. |
| --- | --- |
| **Create and strengthen inclusive culture** | ✓ Neurodiversity training builds a culture of acceptance and inclusion for neurodivergent individuals, which often translates to improved awareness and inclusion of differences more broadly.<br>✓ Neuroinclusive practices improve workplace flexibility and adaptability, which address key HR challenges and trends identified by leading industry research firms such as Gartner and McKinsey. |
| **Build capacity for managers to be better managers** | ✓ Many organizations have observed that many of the neuroinclusive practices they adopted to recruit and retain neurodivergent talent were equally appreciated by their neurotypical employees.<br>✓ Neuroinclusive practices align with employee-centric managerial practices that engage and empower all employees.<br>✓ Neuroinclusive practices improve team psychological safety, critical to employee engagement and high performance, productivity, and innovation. For more on psychological safety and managerial practices, refer to the Neurodiversity at Work Employee Engagement & Growth Series. |
| **Engage existing neurodivergent employees and their allies** | ✓ Awareness of Neurodiversity@Work initiatives encourages current neurodivergent employees to seek support and accommodations, become advocates for their initiatives, improve their engagement and advocacy of their firm, and improve their overall well-being.<br>✓ Neurodiversity@Work initiatives create a sense of belonging and commitment from allies of neurodivergent individuals, especially allies who have a personal connection to the neurodivergent community (e.g., parents, siblings, spouses, caregivers). |

*Manager training spillover effect: Managers become better managers for all when they participate in neuroinclusion training and adopt neuroinclusive practices.*

# 1.3. Strategic value

Leading Neurodiversity@Work public and private organizations recognize the untapped potential that neurodivergent individuals offer. Neurodivergent employees contribute cognitive diversity to the workforce and enhance the potential for productivity and innovation. These initiatives enable organizations to recruit talent that would often be screened out due to biased conventional recruitment and selection processes. When the workplace is neuroinclusive and neurodivergent employees are provided the opportunity to tap into their uniqueness in authentic and healthy ways, employers experience the following strategic benefits:

| **Enhanced overall diversity, leading to better performance** | ✓ Hiring neurodivergent employees adds to the diversity of talents within an organization<br><br>✓ Research is clear that diversity of employees (lived experience and cognitive diversity) enhances team creativity, systematic logical thinking, less groupthink, creative and effective problem-solving, creativity, ability to meet customer needs, productivity, and accessibility of products.<br><br>✓ Scholars and leading employers and agencies identified characteristics that, in general, neurodistinct individuals demonstrate that make them desirable employees. We summarize some of the strengths and success enablers across a few neurominorities in Table 3.2 at the end of the chapter. It is critical to recognize that in order for neurodistinct employees to tap into their strengths, employers must create neuroinclusive environments that are conducive and developmental to the needs of the individual — what we refer to as success enablers. |
|---|---|
| **Model employer: Enhanced employer brand** | ✓ Organizations that are perceived to value diversity and inclusion establish a high-quality employment brand that helps them attract and retain top talent.<br><br>✓ Established Neurodiversity@Work initiatives contribute to a positive work culture that enhances employer brand. |
| **Opportunity for innovation in talent management** | ✓ Applying a neuroinclusive lens in your assessment of roles, business activities, and business processes offers great opportunities for innovation in talent acquisition and development overall.<br><br>✓ Neuroinclusive practices offer a framework for adaptive and flexible work design and team management that matches employee talents and needs with appropriate tasks that improve overall productivity and employee satisfaction.<br><br>✓ Neuroinclusive practices address several human resource management trends identified by Society for Human Resource Management and the McKinsey Company for 2024. |
| **Meeting demand for talent in mission-critical areas** | ✓ Neurodivergent individuals make up 20 percent of the population and have a diversity of talents. By creatively aligning recruitment mechanisms with the preferences of the neurodistinct communities, Neurodiversity@Work employers are able to meet some of their unmet talent needs. While initially the talent needs were largely concentrated in IT, they are not limited to them.<br><br>✓ For Federal agencies specifically, it is critical to tap into the neurodistinct community, both to meet skills gaps and to attract younger generations to the Federal workforce. This is critical to meet the labor shortage and aging Federal workforce needs identified in the 2022 report by the Partnership for Public Service. |

"

*We as an intelligence community — and we as a U.S. Government — have a hard time competing with industry on getting technical talent. We have to explore every avenue possible. We have a hard time competing for the high-demand talent out there in the market, and at the same time, we were seeing evidence from resumes that people on the spectrum have those talents and have those skills. So we made a business case based on acquiring the best talent for our agency.*

— *Federal agency initiative champion (edited for brevity and clarity)*

# 1.4. Desire to make positive social impact

Leading Neurodiversity@Work public and private employers emphasize the desire to make a positive social impact as one of the key motivators for developing their initiatives. Therefore, a key component of the business case is to illustrate the need to create employment opportunities for neurodivergent individuals.

Federal agencies are responsible to surface and serve the needs of the public. They have both the responsibility and opportunity to establish model employment practices that develop the population's talents and apply those talents to carry out the nation's critical public service missions. Neurodiversity@Work initiatives are critical and long overdue. They demonstrate the importance of employment for the well-being of neurodistinct individuals and address the low employment rates this underserved community experiences.

## WHY FOCUS ON THE NEURODISTINCT COMMUNITY?

Neurodistinct individuals comprise 20 percent of the world population, but their participation in the workplace remains largely below that of their neurotypical counterparts. As the graphic below illustrates, neurodistinct individuals are grossly underemployed or unemployed compared to neurotypical individuals.

## WHY EMPLOYMENT?

Employment is core to a person's quality of life and the well-being of the population overall. Its benefits include:

- A means to independent living.

- An opportunity to pursue interests and improve cognitive performance.

- A way to meet the need for inclusion and belonging.

- A key way for individuals to contribute to society.

- Financial, emotional, and health benefits.

- Improving employment of disabled people, including neurodistinct people, will improve economic development and increase the overall U.S. GDP.

- Reduced reliance on social welfare and government programs.

## UNDEREMPLOYMENT AMONG NEUROMINORITIES

Data related to employment of neurodivergent people is limited at best. This data is composed of best estimates from several sources.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Neurotypical** | **95%** employed |
| **Autism** | **20%** employed |
| **ADHD** | **67%** employed |
| **Dyslexia, dyscalculia, dysgraphia** | **54%** employed |

0%                                                                    100%

# 2   What evidence can we use to support our case?

As Neurodiversity@Work initiatives continue to grow and evolve, organizations can do the following to leverage success cases and demonstrate the potential benefits.

✓ Tap into the Neurodiversity@Work Employer Roundtable and use employers' successes as evidence for potential returns.

✓ Draw on employers' initiative models as proof of concept.

✓ Invoke the desire to be a thought leader along with the Neurodiversity@Work Employer Roundtable members and initiative leaders in other nations (see Australia's Department of Defence program in partnership with DXC).

✓ Stress the opportunity to champion initiatives that have been proven across dozens of companies to find talent.

✓ Stress the importance of being a model employer along with Federal agencies that have already launched initiatives (see Chapter 1, Section 4).

✓ Use media coverage of the National Geospatial Agency's neurodiversity hiring initiative.

✓ Use success stories from Federal contractors to illustrate the viability of such initiatives with the support of readily available external Federal contractor resources to reduce risk.

# 3   What are the costs and ROI?

To effectively launch and sustain Neurodiversity@Work initiatives, it is important to secure the necessary resources (see Chapter 4, Initiative Resourcing Models). Leading organizations and Federal agencies have initially utilized a mix of dedicated FTE staff, external partners, and existing resources to launch their initiatives. The cost and ROI of your initiative depend on your organization's existing capacity and needs. This section highlights the general possible components that can guide your thinking about costs and ROI.

In the early stages of your initiative, costs may include the following:

| **Dedicated initiative staff** | ✓ Most organizations and agencies dedicate partial FTE staff to launch their initiatives.<br>✓ Resources often include operational and initiative management staff.<br>✓ Commitment of FTE staff grows as initiatives demonstrate their successes and needs.<br>***To optimize ROI:*** Develop internal expertise to lead this initiative and reduce dependency on initial third-party consultant costs. |
|---|---|
| **Time and other internal resources to carry out initiative activities** | ✓ Agencies and private firms that choose to carry out activities internally incur added costs.<br>✓ Many initiatives include modified screening, interview, and selection processes. The additional time invested in these initiatives requires time from staff, HR, and hiring managers, and teams incur higher costs. These costs vary based on the length of the modified interview process, as some initiatives have a five-day skills-based interview process and others have a half-day process. See Chapter 7, Interview and Selection Process.<br>✓ You incur internal costs (e.g., time) making the modifications needed to better serve neurodivergent candidates.<br>***To optimize ROI:*** Identify and recruit talent normally excluded from mainstream processes; make recruitment processes more inclusive and job-specific. |

| **Manager and team training** | ✓ Training costs vary across organizations and can involve one to four hours of online or in-person team learning. For training models, see Chapter 8, Training. |
| | ✓ Most organizations and agencies initially use external providers for training, incurring costs. |
| | ***To optimize ROI:*** Organizations experience improved engagement outcomes as well as improved collaboration and team effectiveness from this type of training. Benefits are seen across the entire team. |

| **Candidate sourcing** | ✓ Organizations may incur additional costs if they choose to use sourcing partners. Costs vary greatly depending on the scope of the initiative and the type of partner they choose. |
| | ***To optimize ROI:*** Identify and recruit needed talent. |

| **Consulting services** | ✓ If the agency or organization chooses to utilize consultants for its initiative, costs vary based on the scope of the initiative, external provider involvement, and type of consultant (e.g., local agency or for-profit firm). |
| | ***To optimize ROI:*** Consultants can be valuable for best practices and lessons learned, which reduces risk and makes the initial investment of time and money more likely to yield returns. |

## LESSONS LEARNED: HOW DO WE MAKE THE BUSINESS CASE?

- Think about what would work best as a measure of ROI.
- Make sure you explicitly align your initiative objectives with your organization's strategy and values.
- Develop the business case with specific values and key metrics in mind.
- Demonstrate value by specifying the work needed.
- Use your organization's mainstream criteria to assess need and value.
- Base your business case on talent demand and productivity.
- Emphasize alignment with executive orders and adherence to existing agency requirements and practices for hiring.

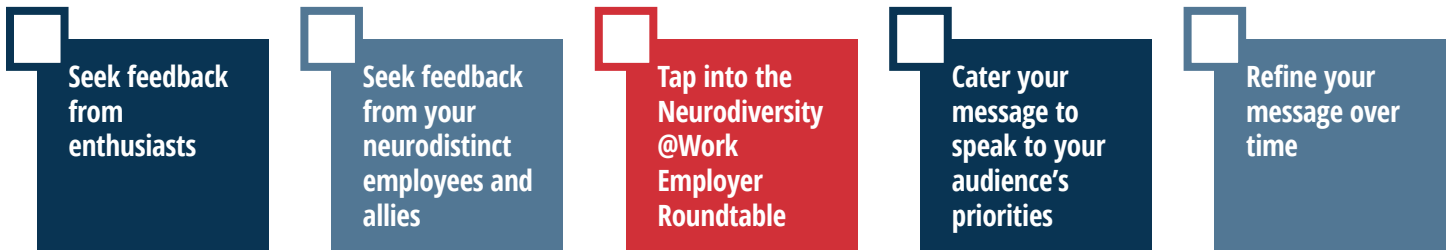*Note: Lessons learned are in the words of initiative staff.*

# 4 How do we strengthen our case?

Your business case will develop and evolve over time. As you build your initial business case, it is important to elicit feedback and refine your arguments to speak to different audiences. Leading firms and agencies suggest that you utilize the following strategies to tap into your internal network of enthusiasts for feedback and support.

✓ Reach out to a supportive audience at first in order to get constructive feedback that will improve your business case and strengthen your determination. Chances are that enthusiasts will help you develop the business case, do necessary research, and expand your network of support.

✓ Reach out to your neurodiversity and/or disability ERGs for feedback and support. Incorporate their perspectives and any successes they may have had in promoting an inclusive culture and improved outcomes.

✓ Encourage your network of enthusiasts to communicate your business case throughout your organization when appropriate.

✓ Tap into the Neurodiversity@Work Employer Roundtable for feedback and support cases.

✓ Learn about your audience's priorities, pain points, and preferences for communication.

✓ Craft specific versions of your business case to cater to different audiences. Perhaps the business unit leaders need to hear more about the strategic value to their specific unit, while executive sponsors might be more interested in higher-level strategic value and organizational culture.

✓ Developing the business case that will resonate with a wide audience takes time. With every interaction and pitch you make, take time to seek feedback, reflect, and refine your business case.

✓ Expect that you will be refining and communicating the business case throughout the planning phase and beyond. At every stage of the initiative, document and communicate the business case.

Being intentional about developing, refining, and elaborating on your business case throughout the lifespan of the initiative will improve its sustainability.

## BUSINESS CASE REFINEMENT CHECKLIST

| ☐ Seek feedback from enthusiasts | ☐ Seek feedback from your neurodistinct employees and allies | ☐ Tap into the Neurodiversity @Work Employer Roundtable | ☐ Cater your message to speak to your audience's priorities | ☐ Refine your message over time |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |

## LESSONS LEARNED: HOW DO WE IMPROVE OUR BUSINESS CASE?

- Use pilot data or data from an existing Neurodiversity@Work organization to demonstrate value in order to bolster the business case.
- Have a way to measure your initiative's impact to make the case for it as a business driver. If there is no way to measure its impact, it can be seen as "nice to have."
- Don't limit the initiative to only one function; customize and match the talent to the need.
- Sustainability is key. As you develop your business case, lay out your plans for growing and sustaining your initiative.
- Make the business case about more than the hard numbers. **The program isn't about checking a box and hiring just to hire.**

*Note: Lessons learned are in the words of initiative staff.*

# Table 3.1: How leading private organizations and Federal agencies made their initial business case

|  | Microsoft | SAP | EY | Chase | Federal agency |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Key components of business case** | • Culture of inclusion<br>• Product accessibility<br>• Untapped talent to meet demand for employees<br>• Social impact<br>• Success cases of other firms | • Untapped talent to meet demand for employees<br>• Social impact<br>• Business transformation | • Culture of inclusion<br>• Untapped talent to meet demand for employees and specific type of work<br>• Social impact | • Social impact<br>• Productivity metrics<br>• Untapped talent to meet demand for employees<br>• Intangible soft-skills benefits | • Desire to be a model employer<br>• Need for talent in mission critical areas<br>• Strategic priority to support employees<br>• Follow other leading nations |
| **ROI** | • Positive manager impact<br>• Discovery of talent that otherwise wouldn't have been identified<br>• About 50% of program hires had applied before through the traditional process and were not selected<br>• More existing employees are starting to self disclose | • Positive employee engagement and retention metrics (company found that, in general, 1% improvement in employee engagement has $50 million annual impact)<br>• Social responsibility benefits | • Proactive innovation and process improvements<br>• Increased productivity, cost savings, reduction in hours | • First hires were 48% more productive after 6 months<br>• Second group of hires was 90-140% more productive with zero errors after six months<br>• Improved communication across the firm | • Meet the need for talent<br>• Increased productivity in critical areas of work<br>• Improved culture of inclusion |

# 5 Possible strengths and success enablers across neurominorities

Neurodiversity refers to the limitless variation among human cognitions and behavioral traits (Singer, 2017). Neurodiversity includes neurodivergent and neurotypical variations. Neurodivergence types or neurominorities include cognitive profiles such as autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and specific learning disabilities (e.g., dyslexia) that vary from the normative typical cognitive profiles in areas such as verbal skills, working memory, visual skills, and processing speed. Studies suggest that 15-20 percent of the population is neurodivergent (Doyle, 2020). Neurodiversity is also a social movement initially led by autistic advocates arguing for the inclusion of neurominorities in society using a strength perspective grounded in the social model of disability and challenging the medical model, which emphasized the weaknesses of neurominorities as conditions to be treated or cured (Doyle, 2020).

> "
> *"Autism is one word attempting to describe millions of different stories."*
>
> — *Stuart Duncan*

The quote above is relevant to all neurominorities. For the purposes of designing neuroinclusive organizations, it is important to understand that our categorization of neurotypes does not apply universally to every individual. Each person has a unique skill set based on various identity characteristics and experiences. Generally speaking, we summarize some of the strengths commonly associated with neurotypes and some success enablers that have been identified by advocates.

## Neurodiversity definitions

- **Acquired Neurodiversity** is a neurological variation that arises due to injury or disease rather than congenital or genetic factors. It is often linked with adaptability and heightened empathy.

- **ADHD** is a neurodevelopmental variation marked by persistent inattention, hyperactivity, and impulsiveness. However, ADHD is also notable for creativity, hyper-focus and high levels of energy and passion.

- **Autism** is a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by social communication challenges and repetitive behavior patterns. It is also associated with focused concentration, fine-detail processing, memory, and sensory awareness.

- **DCD/Dyspraxia** is a developmental coordination condition, a neurological disorder affecting fine and/or gross motor coordination. It is often accompanied by strong verbal skills, empathy, and intuition.

- **Dyscalculia** is a learning variation that affects numerical and arithmetic skills. It is often paired with innovative thinking and strong verbal skills.

- **Dyslexia** is a learning variation characterized by difficulty reading but often accompanied by visual thinking, creativity, and 3D mechanical skills.

- **Mental Health** refers to cognitive, emotional, and social well-being. When facing challenges, individuals may possess a greater depth of thinking and expression.

- **Tourette's Syndrome** is a neurological variation characterized by repetitive, involuntary movements and vocalizations called tics. It is often associated with keen observational skills, cognitive control, and creativity.

# Table 3.2: Possible strengths and success enablers

The following is based on Genius Within and University College London's "Neurodiversity — discussing your strengths with employers."

| | Common strengths | Commonly associated success enablers |
|---|---|---|
| **Autism** | • Detail consciousness<br>• Honesty and tenacity<br>• Efficiency and productivity<br>• Reliability and resourcefulness<br>• Propensity for:<br>  ▶ creating and identifying patterns<br>  ▶ hyperfocusing<br>  ▶ processing and retaining information<br>  ▶ concentration on assigned tasks<br>  ▶ success in repetitive tasks<br>  ▶ success in technical work | • Utilizing nonverbal communication methods<br>• Providing stress management help to avoid overstimulation<br>• Offering time management guidance<br>• Providing organizational assistance<br>• Offering concentration guidance to avoid becoming overly focused on detail<br>• Providing specific instructions<br>• Delivering information in preferred formats<br>• Encouraging use of tools like task managers and note-taking applications |
| **ADHD** | • Passion and enthusiasm<br>• Alertness<br>• Creativity<br>• Efficiency and productivity<br>• Reactiveness<br>• High energy<br>• Proactiveness<br>• Communication and extroversion<br>• Propensity for:<br>  ▶ hyperfocusing<br>  ▶ visualization of 3D models and concepts<br>  ▶ improvisation<br>  ▶ detail recognition<br>  ▶ independent thinking and problem solving<br>  ▶ autonomy in work | • Offering guidance to avoid taking on too much<br>• Providing detail-focused instructions<br>• Offering assistance with social expectations<br>• Providing concentration assistance<br>• Offering memory assistance<br>• Providing organizational assistance<br>• Offering time management guidance<br>• Providing stress management help<br>• Encouraging use of tools like task managers and note-taking applications<br>• Delivering of information in preferred formats |
| **Dyslexia** | • Long-term memory<br>• Creativity<br>• Empathy<br>• Honesty and tenacity<br>• Determination and motivation<br>• Verbal communication<br>• Strategic thinking<br>• Problem solving and thinking outside the box<br>• Big-picture thinking<br>• Expressiveness | • Offering assistance with learning new processes<br>• Providing assistance with following sequences<br>• Providing organizational assistance<br>• Delivering of information in preferred formats<br>• Encouraging use of tools like task managers and note-taking applications |

| | Common strengths | Commonly associated success enablers |
|---|---|---|
| **Dyspraxia** | • Creativity<br>• Empathy<br>• Honesty and tenacity<br>• Determination and motivation<br>• Verbal communication<br>• Strategic thinking<br>• Problem solving and thinking outside the box | • Utilizing verbal communication<br>• Offering stress management guidance<br>• Providing time management and organization guidance<br>• Offering assistance with learning new processes<br>• Providing assistance with following sequences<br>• Offering memory assistance<br>• Providing assistance with motor control-focused tasks<br>• Providing assistance with finding directions<br>• Delivering information in preferred formats<br>• Encouraging use of tools like task managers and note-taking applications |
| **Dysgraphia** | • Creativity<br>• Big-picture thinking<br>• Problem solving and thinking outside the box<br>• Verbal communication<br>• Expressiveness | • Utilizing verbal communication<br>• Offering stress management guidance<br>• Providing time management and organization guidance<br>• Offering assistance with learning new processes<br>• Providing assistance with following new sequences<br>• Offering assistance with learning new processes<br>• Offering memory assistance<br>• Delivering of information in preferred formats<br>• Encouraging use of tools like task managers and note-taking applications |
| **Dyscalculia** | • Creativity<br>• Big-picture thinking<br>• Strong communication skills<br>• Problem solving and thinking outside the box | • Utilizing verbal communication<br>• Offering stress management guidance<br>• Providing time management and organization guidance<br>• Offering assistance with learning new processes<br>• Providing assistance with learning new processes<br>• Providing assistance with following sequences<br>• Offering memory assistance<br>• Delivering of information in preferred formats<br>• Encouraging use of tools like task managers and note-taking applications |

# Initiative Resourcing Models

Neurodiversity@Work leading organizations and Federal agencies vary in their resource models. These decisions depend on the organization or agency's overall structure, executive support, and available internal and external resources. In this section, we discuss the resourcing and staffing models that leading Neurodiversity@Work organizations and agencies adopted to establish and sustain their neurodiversity initiatives over time. This chapter will address these *key questions*:

▶ **1. How do we resource our initiative?**
  ● What resources are necessary for launching our initiative?

▶ **2. How do we best leverage external partners?**
  ● What does the external partner landscape look like?
  ● What criteria should we use to assess and consider which external partnerships are right for us?

## 1 How do we resource our initiative?

As discussed in Chapter 2, designing your initiative resource model and structure requires deliberate analysis to identify what would work best for your agency at its current stage, while also considering the potential for growth and sustainability over time. We emphasized two key principles:

### 1. Customize your initiative to fit your agency's operating model, culture, needs, and constraints.

✓ Dedicate sufficient resources and focused attention to design an initiative that works for your organization.

✓ Be prepared to spend the time, effort, and energy to elicit feedback from internal and external partners, especially current neurodivergent employees.

### 2. Be strategic about what to own and what to outsource.

✓ Use the right partners for the right aspects of the initiative.

✓ Be intentional about how to leverage your internal and external resources.

In this section, we define more explicitly the resources you may consider and the associated categories of costs each may incur.

## 1.1. What resources are necessary for launching our initiative?

Neurodiversity initiatives can start in any area within your agency, but it is critical to create a coalition of internal partners to ensure that your initiative can access relevant functions. For example, successful initiatives across many organizations are started within Talent Acquisition, but with strong collaboration with HR, DEI, and individual business units.

As you explore ways to design and resource your initiative, consider the following *three key practices* common to leading organizations and agencies. For details of the models a few leading organizations and agencies used initially, refer to Table 4.1 at the end of this chapter.



INTERNAL PARTNERS

DEDICATED STAFF

EXTERNAL PARTNERS

## 1. HAVE DEDICATED STAFF

Those leading successful Neurodiversity@Work initiatives stress the importance of having some FTE staff dedicated to them. Most agencies and private organizations started with partially dedicated FTEs of key staff, and the FTEs grew as the initiatives' scope and impact grew. For example, some designate 50 percent of an FTE from Talent Acquisition or DEI to their neurodiversity initiatives. The remaining 50 percent of that FTE is dedicated to supporting related functions such as broader internship programs, recruiting, or accessibility more broadly. Over time, the dedicated FTE changes based on the needs of the initiative and organization. Dedicating staff FTE to lead the program is important for three reasons:

- Developing internal expertise enables you to continue to develop and evolve your initiative in ways that suit your goals, values, and culture.

- It reduces dependency on any initial third-party consultant costs.

- For some Federal agencies, security clearance requires that some work be done internally, which creates barriers for hiring external partners.

> *Dedicated staff is key! You will run the risk of burning out your volunteers or losing expertise if members take a different assignment and are no longer able to support your efforts.*
>
> — *Federal agency initiative staff*

## 2. UTILIZE INTERNAL RESOURCES AND EXISTING STRUCTURES

Leading agencies and organizations leverage internal resources. HR provides talent acquisition and onboarding support; Diversity and Inclusion raises awareness and communicates successes; employee resource groups offer guidance and support; department champions raise awareness and create the conditions for meaningful acceptance.

As we suggest in Chapter 2, if you do not have an existing neurodiversity ERG, consider forming an advisory group of neurodivergent current employees for feedback and support. Collaborating with internal departments is key for not only tapping into internal existing resources but also for broadening awareness and acceptance of the initiative. Refer to Appendix A for a detailed list of critical internal partners and the roles they can play in designing and implementing your agency's initiative activities.

## 3. LEVERAGE KNOWLEDGE AND RESOURCES IN YOUR COMMUNITIES

Leading initiatives leverage resources in their communities to source talent, training, coaches, and other support services for existing and potential employees. In many cases, organizations start with outsourced functions. This is often critical as the agencies build their internal competencies for neuroinclusive practices.

As their initiatives scale and expertise mature, leading organizations and agencies develop some functions in-house. Determining when it is more mission-critical, advantageous, and cost-effective to leverage external expertise is key to launching and sustaining your initiative. Reach out to your internal department and the Office of Personnel Management to identify available resources and capabilities within the Federal Government (reviewed in Chapter 1) to learn more. See the external resources in Appendix A for a list of organizations that can assist you in getting your Neurodiversity@Work program started.

> *Speak to lines of business to figure out how to tap into internal resources.*
>
> — *private organization initiative lead*

## LESSONS LEARNED: PROGRAM RESOURCING MODELS

- Leverage others who have gone there before — find out who has already done things in the external ecosystem and learn from them. Learn their successes or failures and whether they can recommend a vendor for training.
- Find partners that are flexible. Having partners that can customize to your needs and your culture is critical.
- As you build your expertise, you will likely rely less on external partners and more on other Federal agency partners.
- Make sure your existing neurodivergent employees provide expertise to you and your ERGs; their experiences and insight will prove invaluable.
- It's not possible to grow a program by outsourcing recruiting because that will not provide a full pipeline of talent. Undertake serious due diligence about your sourcing partners to see how valuable they will be for you (especially if they are small or are offering services for free).
- Utilize your partners for what they can do best. Don't try to do everything yourself when there's someone else who has the expertise.
- Make sure the ERGs understand your program and how it works, not just small bits and pieces.
- At universities, partner with the disability resource center on campus, not just career services. Those two offices don't often interface with each other, and individuals you're attempting to recruit on campus may not be going to the career services office.
- Have more than one external partner/vendor instead of having all your eggs in one basket.
- Speak to lines of business to figure out how to tap into internal resources.

*Note: Lessons learned are in the words of initiative staff.*

## 2 How do we best leverage external partners?

Neuroinclusive employment practices grounded in the neurodiversity paradigm are relatively new. Most organizations' talent, HR, and DEI functions have limited expertise in this domain. To this end, it is critical that organizations build their capacity for neuroinclusion by partnering with the right external partners to help build their capacity and practices in ways that align with their values and culture. Agencies must strike the right balance of internal and external expertise for the initiatives to succeed. Below, we explain the types of external partners you can leverage and the criteria for assessing the suitability of any partner.

## 2.1. What is the landscape of external neuroinclusion partners?

The Neurodiversity@Work movement and the rise of the Employer Roundtable, gave way to a new sub-sector of disability employment services often referred to as service providers, neuroinclusion consultants, or neurodiversity workforce intermediaries. We refer to this critical sub-segment of providers and key stakeholders within the Neurodiversity@Work ecosystem as "external neuroinclusion partners."

External neuroinclusion partners extend the traditional Developmental Disability Administration-related employment service offering and scope. There are currently more than 40 external neuroinclusion partners operating in the U.S., and they may be private or non-profit. While some of these partners serve DDA-eligible individuals and are eligible for state and Federal funding, many do not and are funded directly through employers. External neuroinclusion partners are grounded in the neurodiversity movement principles, which

> "*[The emerging external neuroinclusion partners are] bringing entrepreneurialism to the employment system for adults with developmental differences, which has needed this energy and creativity for some time.*
>
> — *Michael Bernick, Harvard Business Review*

apply a strength-perspective to difference and focus on the transformation of organizations toward neuroinclusive work practices.

"

*While considering providers, Federal agencies must consider whether the service provider is a Federal contractor and how they might navigate the RFP process.*

— *Federal agency lead*

# EXAMPLES OF NEUROINCLUSION EXTERNAL PARTNER FEDERAL CONTRACTORS

There are many traditional Developmental Disability Administration-related employment service providers that are also Federal contractors. Here, we highlight the services of the two external partners that have provided services to Federal agencies in the Neurodiversity@Work domain specifically.

| Federal contractor | Strategy | Talent sourcing | Coaching | Training |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| MITRE | Yes | No | No | Yes |
| Melwood | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |

# NEUROINCLUSION EXTERNAL PARTNERS

This table is an illustration of providers, not an exhaustive list.

| Company | Strategy | Talent sourcing | Coaching | Training |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Beyond Impact | Yes | No | No | Yes |
| CAI - Neurodiverse Solutions | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Integrate for Autism | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Neurodiversity in the Workplace | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| NeuroTalent Works | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Potentia Workforce | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Rangam | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |

# NEUROINCLUSION EXTERNAL PARTNERS' SERVICES

External neuroinclusion partners (we will refer to them as vendors in this section for brevity) build the capacity of private and public employers by offering:

## 1. STRATEGY CONSULTING

Vendors can provide consulting on neuroinclusion practices. Ideally, external partners will have expertise in both neurodivergent affirming practices and organizational processes, and they can share practices that will be applicable to the agency's setting and values. Many consultants have direct experience helping to design and implement neuroinclusion programming. They can be critical to ensuring best practices and quality standards are followed in program implementation.

The majority of mature Neurodiversity@Work initiatives have utilized consultants for strategy and guidance in some form, especially early in the process. Federal agencies have also leveraged the expertise of external Federal contractors. While the range of consulting services is broad, consultants and strategists can help your agency:

- Identify roadmaps and best practices for setting up neuroinclusion efforts
- Prepare the business case for executive sponsorships
- Complete a project plan to launch hiring programs and other types of initiatives
- Advise on additional services
- Conduct audits of current processes and capacity for neuroinclusion
- Evaluate other service providers
- Provide direct training and guidance to internal stakeholders and teams
- Provide guidance on how to leverage neuroinclusion toward business transformation

## 2. TALENT SOURCING

Vendors can supply many types of talent sourcing services. It is important to evaluate these vendors based on the needs of your agency. Options for talent sourcing include typical talent acquisition practices, but with a specialization on sourcing neurodivergent talent through:

- Recruiting: Vendors can provide candidates for specific pre-identified roles and deliver a neurodivergent pipeline.
- Sourcing: Vendors can help develop a pipeline of neurodivergent candidates for future or current job openings by researching referral sources, meeting with potential candidates, and building a network of qualified, relevant candidates.
- Screening: Vendors can sort through an existing candidate pool to ensure that the talent is qualified and relevant to a neurodiversity hiring program.

  *Note: It is important in a screening process to ensure proper care is taken in respecting disclosure protocols surrounding any disability status. Additionally, due to health-care access barriers for many people, a best practice in the private sector is to consider self-identification legitimate when assessing program fit. This ensures that a medical diagnosis, which can be hard to obtain or prove, is not required to participate in a neurodiversity initiative. This may be particularly challenging in the Federal context due in part to requirements for Schedule A hiring and requesting a reasonable accommodation..*

- Staffing: Vendors are available that provide project-based solutions and can hire external employees into teams to deliver on set objectives to a specific unit within your agency. These staffing arrangements often have clear project-based objectives and can be completed using contingent or outsourced labor, or by permanent employees. Such workers must meet agency standards and security clearance requirements.

## 3. SUCCESS COACHING

There is a growing number of partners that provide success coaching for neurodivergent employees. This provides a support function that often reports to an internal HR team or to the neurodiversity program in the agency. A best practice is for vendors to utilize a strengths-based or neurodiversity affirming lens in the service delivery.

Coaches can help employees with:

- Stress and anxiety management
- Tasks and time management
- Interpersonal challenges
- Achieving professional goals
- Processing feedback

Coaching sessions have a variety of formats and methodologies but typically offer 1:1 or group support. These services are made available to:

- New employees
- Current employees
- Managers/teams (not necessarily neurodivergent individuals)

  *Note: It is important that neurodiversity coaching not be measured by an employee's job performance or advancement opportunities. The goal of the support function is to provide assistance in the above areas, a byproduct of which can often be increased productivity. However, comfort in areas such as stress and anxiety management and task management is the primary objective.*

*As we discussed in Chapter 2, each agency will have unique needs based on its internal expertise, what is available from other support agencies (e.g., OPM or ODEP), and what it can contract out. To maximize success and reduce risk, it is critical to identify needs and select capable external neuroinclusion partners aligned with the agency's vision, goals, and culture.*

## 4. TRAINING

External training partners provide neuroinclusive training and development services, bringing expertise, resources, and often perspectives from neurodivergent lived experience. Training partners may design and deliver customized training programs, develop learning materials, and host workshops or seminars.

Training areas to consider:

- Understanding neurodiversity and employment
  *Introduction to Neurodiversity, ND Employment Landscape, Communication and Management Best Practices*
- Employee development and support
  *Psychological Safety, Belonging, Mentorship, Coaching*
- Workplace communication and collaboration
  *Team Communication, Project Management*
- Recruitment, hiring, and career pathing
  *Job Descriptions, Sourcing and Interviewing, Goal-Setting*
- Program sustainability, scalability and social impact
  *Change Management, Communications, Impact Measurement and Evaluation, Ethical and Social Responsibility*

Training audiences to consider:

- All employees
- Leaders and managers
- Hiring managers and recruiters
- Neurodivergent professionals
- Support function employees such as those in HR, Accommodations, or Employee Assistance Programs
- Security personnel

# 2.2. What criteria should we use for external partnerships?

In Section 3 of Chapter 2, we discussed the importance of identifying external neuroinclusion partners. Neurodiversity@Work leading agencies and private employers emphasized the following principles in considering partners:

✓ Value alignment

✓ Understanding of the agency context (work, regulation, complexity)

✓ Practices grounded in neurodiversity paradigm, focusing on strengths

✓ Ability to emphasize "nothing about us without us," as discussed in Chapter 2

✓ Sophistication in organizational change management and transformation

✓ Understanding of the agency's RFP process and ability to comply with contracting requirements and security and privacy requirements

## FRAMEWORK FOR SELECTING AN EXTERNAL NEUROINCLUSION PARTNER

This framework builds on focus areas that have been identified by Neurodiversity@Work Roundtable organizations as important to consider when selecting a partner.

| APPROACH | VALUES |
|---|---|
| **Does the partner …** | **Does the partner …** |
| • use a strengths-based approach to neurodiversity? <br><br> • support organizations in viewing neurodiversity within their workforce through this strengths-based lens? <br><br> • presume competence in all professionals? <br><br> • adhere to the notion that including and supporting neurodistinct professionals at work is to the benefit of all involved? | • show understanding, tolerance, patience and understanding to companies and stakeholders, regardless of where they are in their neuroinclusion efforts? <br><br> • empower people to seek guidance, education, and support and navigate the challenges and complexities of addressing neurodiversity at their organization? <br><br> • foster a collaborative and empathetic environment, encouraging growth and learning? |
| **MINDSET** | **BUSINESS MODEL** |
| **Does the partner …** | **Does the partner …** |
| • maintain a "growth mindset," supporting the evolving ideas and approaches within neurodiversity employment? <br><br> • foster a culture of continuous learning, openness to new ideas, and adaptability? <br><br> • stay current with, and supportive of, emerging research, best practices, and evolving needs of individuals and companies? <br><br> • embrace flexibility and innovation in their strategies, allowing for ongoing improvement and refinement of their programs? | • serve client companies, as opposed to providing paid services to individual professionals and job seekers? <br><br> • maintain an established program providing services to companies, supporting successful outcomes within the scope required? <br><br> • support clients in addressing systemic barriers, biases, and misconceptions, assisting in the development of inclusive policies, systems, and environments where neurodistinct professionals can thrive? |

# Table 4.1: Leading firms' initial key functions and costs

|  | Microsoft | SAP | EY |
|---|---|---|---|
| **Organization's structure (where the program sits)** | • Corporate Affairs | • Diversity & Inclusion | • Enterprise Support Services |
| **Program staff** | • Started with partial FTE<br>• 3 FTEs: Director of Inclusive Hiring, Senior Inclusive Hiring Program Manager, Inclusive Hiring Program Manager<br>• FTEs have other responsibilities related to accessibility generally | • Started with partial FTE<br>• 3 FTEs, including Program Lead | • Started with partial FTE<br>• 4 FTEs: Program and Operations Leader; three FTE managers, one for each Neurodiverse Center of Excellence office |
| **Internal partner support** | • Global Talent Acquisition / HR<br>• Legal<br>• D&I<br>• Executive sponsorship<br>• Employee resource groups<br>• Hiring business units | • Executive sponsorship<br>• D&I<br>• HR<br>• Business units<br>• Employee resource groups | • HR<br>• Executive sponsorship |
| **Logistical support** | • Event logistics – $ | • Event logistics – $ | • Event logistics – $ |
| **Sourcing** | • Alumni networks<br>• Internal: employee referrals; word of mouth<br>• Vendors – $<br>• Social media – $<br>• Virtual career fairs – $<br>• Universities | • Internal: employee referrals; word of mouth<br>• Vendors – $<br>• Local NGOs – $ (partly paid for by state)<br>• Universities | • Local NGOs – $ (partly paid for by state)<br>• Social media – $<br>• Virtual career fairs – $<br>• Internal: employee referrals; word of mouth<br>• Universities |
| **Training** | • Vendors - $ | • Vendors – $<br>• In-house<br>• Academics, researchers – $ | • In-house<br>• Vendor – $<br>• Local NGOs – $ (partly paid for by state) |
| **Coaching** | • Vendors - $ | • Vendors - $ | • Vendors - $ |

Note: $ - indicates additional costs

| | Chase | Pilot agency | Dell Technologies | Chevron |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Organization's structure (where the program sits)** | • Technology Organization | • DEI/EEO Office | • Talent Acquisition | • Talent Acquisition |
| **Program staff** | • Started with partial FTE<br>• 3 FTEs – Executive Director & VP of Neurodiversity Specialist<br>• 2 Interns | • Partial FTE for pilot phase | • Started with partial FTE<br>• 1 FTE – Program Lead | • 2 FTEs – Talent Acquisition Diversity Manager, Diversity Program Advisor |
| **Internal partner support** | • Mortgage Banking Division<br>• Business resource groups<br>• HR<br>• Management<br>• Global Security<br>• D&I<br>• Executive sponsorship | • General Council<br>• 3 different technical divisions<br>• HR<br>• Contracting Office<br>• Public Affairs<br>• Science and Technology Office of Overseeing Agency | • Executive sponsorship<br>• Talent Acquisition<br>• Employee resource groups<br>• Hiring business units<br>• HR<br>• D&I | • Talent Acquisition Specialist<br>• HR business partner<br>• ERG leader<br>• Executive sponsor |
| **Logistical support** | • Vendors – $ | • Vendors - $ | • Event logistics – $<br>• Vendors – $ | • Vendors - $ |
| **Sourcing** | • Vendors – $<br>• Internal: employee referrals; word of mouth<br>• Universities | • Vendors – $ | • Vendors – $<br>• Internal: employee referrals; word of mouth<br>• Universities | • Vendors – $<br>• Internal: employee referrals; word of mouth<br>• Universities |
| **Training** | • Vendors - $ | • Vendors - $ | • Vendors - $ | • Vendors - $ |
| **Coaching** | • Vendors - $ | • Vendors - $ | • Vendors - $ | • Vendors - $ |

Note: $ - indicates additional costs

# Initiative Scope & Employment Models

The scope of Neurodiversity@Work initiatives varies by organization. Each employment model varies based on the organization's needs and the initiative's maturity. Factors that shape the initiative scope and employment model include the organization's culture, its orientation to employee development, existing employment models in mainstream hiring, and competitiveness for talent.  This chapter addresses the following *two questions* related to initiative scope and employment models:

▶ **1. What do more mature initiatives look like?**
- What kinds of models are feasible to start?
- What type of employment do we offer?

▶ **2. How do we integrate and socialize the initiative model for sustainability?**
- How do we integrate the Neurodiversity@Work initiative into our agency's current structures?
- How do we garner support for long-term sustainability, internally and externally?

## INITIATIVE SCOPE AND EMPLOYMENT MODEL CHECKLIST

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| ☐ **Determine the needs of your neurodivergent employee communities** | ☐ **Determine talent needs** | ☐ **Determine existing internal and external support in various locales** |
| ☐ **Determine the short-term scope and employment model while considering the long-term vision** | ☐ **Solicit input from neurodivergent advocates and managers** | ☐ **Communicate success stories regularly and widely** |

## **1** What do more mature initiative models look like?

The agency's needs, values, and culture drive the type of Neurodiversity@Work initiative model it develops and scales. There is no "one size fits all." Organizational readiness for neuroinclusion is critical to the design and launch of your initiative. Building a genuinely neuroinclusive culture takes time and intentional investments. Most Federal agencies and private organizations start small and grow based on various factors unique to the agency or organization. The support systems available in the agency and the agency's willingness to work with external partners are the two significant determinants of the initial scope and employment model. Early initiatives found it more challenging to grow their activities in locations that do not have support agencies. This concern, however, has become less significant as more neuroinclusion external partners (refer to Chapter 4) launch and operate initiatives nationally and globally.

Each leading organization has developed and evolved its initiative to meet talent needs and provide meaningful employment to neurodivergent individuals. Factors that drive the employment model and scope are:

- ✓ The neurodiversity community's needs and preferences
- ✓ The agency's talent needs
- ✓ The agency's focus and structures
- ✓ The local resources available to support the initiative
- ✓ Agency-wide support for growing the initiative

# 1.1. What kinds of models are feasible to start?

Agencies and private firms have utilized various *strategies or models* to launch workplace neuroinclusion initiatives. These strategies are used separately or together as the initiative matures and scales over time. Although there is no single agreed-upon taxonomy or standard to classify these initiative models, we broadly group them into four distinct types, including:

## 1. NEURODIVERSITY HIRING PROGRAM (OR LIGHTHOUSE MODEL):

The Lighthouse Model is the most common initiation strategy, in which an employer creates a specific alternative path to recruiting, interviewing, and hiring neurodivergent employees. Neurodiversity@Work creates neuroinclusive practices for recruitment, interviewing, selection, onboarding, and ongoing employee support and advancement parallel to mainstream processes in collaboration with HR and Talent Acquisition.

The goal of neurodiversity hiring programs is to place and integrate neurodistinct hires into their teams in effective neuroinclusive ways. The hires and teams work collaboratively with Neurodiversity@Work program staff to provide the support structure needed by neurodistinct employees and, more importantly, create a neuroinclusive environment for the entire team (including neurodistinct and neurotypical members) and manager. Disclosure of neurodistinct identity remains the decision of the neurodistinct employee; it is not disclosed by the program staff to others on the team. Hires are integrated into their team practices to work on products, serve functions, or deliver specific services, depending on their roles.

Lighthouse Models are initiated in specific geographies and are limited in scope within the organization. The initial scope focuses on identifying unmet talent needs and partnering with a specific set of departments and managers to undergo neuroinclusion training and transformation. Over time, these programs grow across geographies and units, though they remain independent hiring programs parallel to mainstream hiring practices.

## 2. CENTER OF EXCELLENCE

Centers of Excellence initiate neurodiversity hiring in ways similar to the Lighthouse Model by creating neuroinclusive hiring practices independent of mainstream processes. The key difference is that neurodistinct hirees are placed in one unit, a Center of Excellence that delivers specific services or supports to its organization or clients. Hirees in this model are clustered together and are supervised by Neurodiversity@Work program staff. The neurodistinct employee may work with employees across the organization (especially in consulting), while their home unit is the Neurodiversity@Work Center of Excellence.

## 3. PRACTICE FOR EXCELLENCE IN NEUROINCLUSION

Practice for Excellence in Neuroinclusion is what we are observing as the natural evolution of the Lighthouse Model. In organizations where Neurodiversity@Work hiring programs have matured, the initiative shifts attention to focus on transforming mainstream hiring and employee support practices more broadly. As programs improve their hiring practices over time and demonstrate broader impact, they gain support to transform organizations' recruiting, interviewing, and onboarding practices. They become a center of expertise to which units across the organization can turn for support and transformation when there is a need or desire for neuroinclusion. Momentum is also in place for raising acceptance for neuroinclusion across the agency or organization.

*Leading Neurodiversity@Work private organizations emphasize the importance of creating a neuroinclusive culture as a key factor in their sustainability and success, regardless of their initial initiative scope.*
*For a guide to building a neuroinclusive culture, refer to the Neurodiversity@Work Employee Engagement and Growth Series.*

**4.** NEUROINCLUSIVE BUSINESS PROCESS TRANSFORMATION:

Neuroinclusive principles have always emphasized the importance of reimagining work and work processes to capitalize on individual strengths and improve alignment between tasks and employee interest and motivation. Maturing Neurodiversity@Work hiring programs continue to drive innovation in work design, especially around mission-critical areas of work — what we refer to as Neuroinclusive Business Process Transformation. In this critical strategy, leading Neurodiversity@Work initiatives leverage neuroinclusive employment practices and principles to reimagine work design for roles across all neurotypes. Work is designed to meet interests and strengths and challenge the traditional orientation to job design.

As Neurodiversity@Work initiatives mature — meaning they develop effective work practices contextualized to meet the organization's needs — organizations and agencies leverage a combination of these strategies. These initiative models are not mutually exclusive and are proven most effective when they are leveraged holistically to meet various needs within your agency's structure and legal and political context.

## SPOTLIGHT ON …

**Advantages of starting with the Lighthouse Model or a Center of Excellence**

Neuroinclusion requires changes to both work design and culture. Organizations typically scope their initiatives to a pilot of contained parallel implementation practices, redesigning recruitment, interview, hiring, and onboarding practices in parallel to existing mainstream practices. Training and development for managers and teams may also be contained to smaller groups. At the same time, each organization's processes are designed and iterated for improvement. This scoping of the initiative reduces cost and risk of failure while increasing the organization's ability to design a compelling set of practices that may later be implemented more broadly across different divisions and the organization at large.

## WHAT INITIATIVE MODEL AND EMPLOYMENT TYPES ARE RIGHT FOR OUR AGENCY?

Choosing the right initiative model involves assessing the agency's objectives, the nature of the work, and the target talent for recruitment. By strategically utilizing these models, Federal agencies can enhance their service delivery, innovation, and workplace diversity.

# 1.2 What type of employment do we offer?

Organizations and agencies may use various employment types consistent with their overall hiring practices. Early initiatives focused on hiring into a single role to start. They quickly moved to hiring into a wide variety of roles across multiple departments after recognizing the diversity of talents and strengths within the neurodivergent community. One benefit of focusing on fewer roles to start is that you can develop a strong proof of concept as you transform and contextualize neuroinclusive processes. Limiting the number of roles to start can help you improve your practices quickly to transfer the lessons learned across roles and departments more widely. Mature programs are good examples of how to start with a few roles and translate what you learn to virtually any role in your agency. As you design your initiative, it is important to demonstrate the diversity of strengths and preferences of the neurodivergent community and identify pathways for career development and lateral and upward career movement.

Full-time

Internship
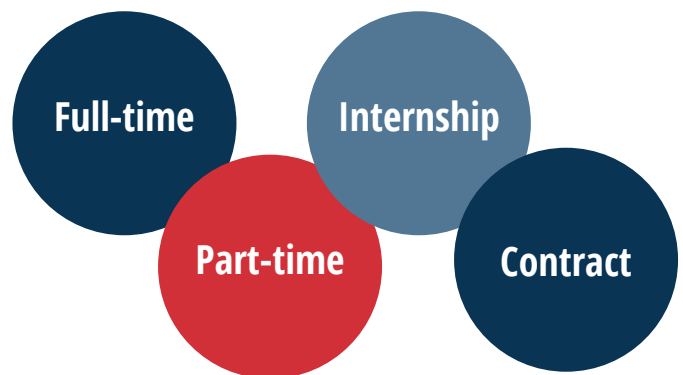
Part-time

Contract

In most cases, Neurodiversity@Work initiatives offer full-time employment and internships, with some organizations providing contract roles. Some organizations, however, provide part-time work to some individuals to meet the organization's demand and the individual's preferences.

Depending on the agency's hiring needs, hiring authorities, and clearance requirements, you may leverage a mix of employment types. In Chapter 1 and Chapter 6, we discuss hiring authorities that may affect the mix of roles you provide. We encourage you to work with your HR department and contact OPM to learn more about requirements around hiring roles in your agency.

## INITIAL HIRING TO SUPPORT THE BUSINESS CASE

Ask the following questions when considering where to start:

- ☑ What roles are core to our agency's mission?
- ☑ Which roles do we most commonly hire for?
- ☑ Which roles are chronically unfilled?
- ☑ Which roles are most likely to remain stable?
- ☑ At which location(s) do we most need talent?

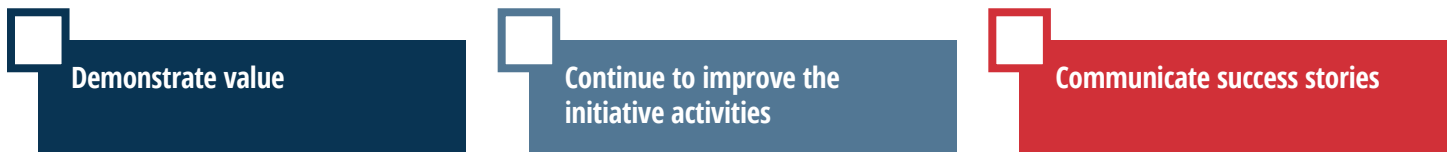# 2 How do we integrate and socialize the model for sustainability?

Support for the Neurodiversity@Work initiative and its sustainability require communicating the business case regularly and broadly across the organization (refer to Chapter 2 for communication strategies). It's essential to demonstrate value to the agency and identify potential needs that can be met through the initiative. Leading Neurodiversity@Work organizations were able to grow across departments, in different roles, and across geographic regions by demonstrating business value and social impact in tangible and intangible ways. Refer to Chapter 2, the Business Case, for details.

Key to maintaining and increasing internal and external support is keeping a proactive approach to your design and redesign of initiative elements. Seek feedback from all stakeholders and partners, especially from your neurodivergent employees and their managers. Neurodivergent employees and their managers can provide great insight regarding unmet needs, opportunities, and solutions. This is important to stay true to the "nothing about us without us" principle of the neurodiversity movement.

## EMPLOYMENT MODEL GOALS

- ✓ Add value to the agency by meeting talent needs
- ✓ Provide meaningful employment to neurodivergent individuals
- ✓ Welcome and equitably include neurodivergent employees
- ✓ Empower neurodivergent employees to contribute their talent

## HOW TO GARNER SUPPORT

| Demonstrate value | Continue to improve the initiative activities | Communicate success stories |

# Recruitment Sourcing

Recruiting the right talent is a critical success factor for any organization and is especially critical for Neurodiversity@Work initiatives. Because many in the neurodivergent community are unaware of Neurodiversity@Work employment opportunities and are often not engaged in traditional recruiting channels, leading organizations emphasize the importance of identifying the right channels to reach the desired talent. Leading organizations and agencies advise others interested in Neurodiversity@Work programs to own their sourcing function and leverage a wide range of channels. They achieve this through various external partnerships with sourcing providers, community agencies, and colleges.

In this chapter, we synthesize information on how to find talent for your Neurodiversity@Work initiative. This is particularly important to Lighthouse Model initiatives. We address the following *four questions* related to Neurodiversity@Work recruiting and sourcing:

▶ **1. Where do we find talent?**
- Which hiring authorities will support hiring our target demographic?
- What types of external partners can help us recruit the right talent for our organization?
- How can we leverage neurodiversity hiring platforms?

▶ **2. How do we tap into the local neurodivergent community?**
- Who should we engage?
- How can we engage our local community?

▶ **3. How do we engage universities and colleges?**
- Who do we reach out to in universities and colleges?
- In what ways can we best engage with universities and colleges?

▶ **4. How do we make our recruitment practices neuroinclusive?**
- What are the best practices for outreach?
- How do we make our job descriptions neuroinclusive?

## RECRUITING AND SOURCING CHECKLIST

☐ Define the desired skill sets

☐ Identify external partners adaptable to your needs

☐ Forge partnerships with the right parties

☐ Educate yourself regarding community preferences

☐ Develop and execute an internal communication plan to raise awareness

☐ Develop a social media communication plan to raise awareness

# **1** Where do we find talent?

Once you have identified your talent needs (Refer to Chapters 2 and 5 for more on the topic), consider the range of talent sources available to your agency with care. Organizations have deployed numerous successful strategies to find talent. Many of the leading organizations stress the importance of owning the sourcing function by working with various external partners. Private organizations' sources of talent have varied depending on their location and their specific needs. Similarly, Federal agencies have leveraged internal agency sources, sources and programs from other agencies, and external private partners.

## 1.1. Which hiring authorities will support hiring our target demographic?

First, it is critical for agencies to explore existing channels to identify talent available across the Federal landscape through the use of different hiring authorities, including:

✓ Schedule A, a special hiring authority available to all agencies offering an alternative and expedited hiring process for Federal employers to recruit people with disabilities. Agencies are able to list specific positions as Schedule A when they are posted to the USAJOBS site. Neurodivergent job seekers can then identify relevant job postings using a specific icon and utilize a disabilities filter in their search.

✓ Title 10 in U.S. Code, another unique hiring authority under the Defense Civilian Intelligence Personnel System (DCIPS) described in Chapter 1. DCIPS may have competitive hiring processes for some roles and a non-competitive process — in this case, excepted service, for other roles.

✓ Direct-Hire Authority, most suitable for cases when there is a critical hiring need that is not met through competitive hiring. IT/cybersecurity hiring authority is a good example of one that has been leveraged for neurodiversity hiring practices.

✓ People with Disabilities Appointing Authority is also relevant for understanding alternative hiring practices.

✓ 30% Disabled Veterans Appointing Authority may also be especially relevant to neurodiversity hiring.

✓ Student hiring programs provide ways for college students or graduates to move directly into Federal positions. Programs differ in eligibility requirements for conversion to permanent hire. Check with your agency or email pathways@opm.gov to identify which program works best for you.

## IDENTIFY THE RIGHT TALENT

☑ Recognize that this particular talent pool may not always communicate their skill set clearly or completely in their resumes.

☑ Define the needed skill set explicitly.

☑ Communicate with potential candidates to identify their skill sets more clearly.

☑ Communicate your needs to your sourcing partners.

☑ Consider more than the resume.

☑ It is critical to identify quality candidates, especially in the launch phase of your program.

# 1.2. What types of external partners can help us recruit the right talent for our organization?

Leading Federal agencies also tapped into external partners and community networks to identify and recruit neurodivergent talent. The appropriateness and availability of any of these sources will be dependent on the agency's nature, location, and security constraints. Leading agencies leveraged a number of external partners, including:

| | |
|---|---|
| **Neurodiversity@ Work employer networks** | ✓ Consider participating in Neurodiversity@Work Employer Roundtable events and summits to learn about best practices and connect with employers and external partners.<br>✓ Participate regularly in virtual career fairs and ability events.<br>✓ Consider connecting with the Neurodiverse Federal Workforce Advisory Team by contacting Teresa Thomas, the Mitre Corporation's program lead for neurodiverse talent enablement, at tdthomas@mitre.org. |
| **Local and national NGOs** | ✓ Reach out to and collaborate with local agencies such as The Arc and vocational rehabilitation services.<br>✓ Social agencies are more likely to be good sourcing partners if the community they support matches the type of role you are hiring for. |
| **External neuroinclusion vendors** | ✓ The use of a vendor often depends on location. In some locations, it may make more sense to use internal recruiters, or a vendor with more specialized knowledge might be required. See Appendix A.<br>✓ The use of vendors will be dependent on agency sourcing constraints.<br>✓ Vendors may also be used if there is a time crunch to fill a position. |
| **Federal and state agencies** | ✓ Identify vocational rehabilitation agencies that align with neurodiversity principles and practices.<br>✓ Research your Ability One contractors to determine if they also support clients who might be able to fill the roles for which you are recruiting. |
| **Social media & public presence** | ✓ Social media and press activity create awareness and generate candidate leads.<br>✓ Social media activity and presence is cost-effective and must have a clear link or directions to program information and ways to apply. |
| **Networks, relationships, word of mouth** | ✓ Leading organizations and Federal agencies identified internal employees as an especially effective source for talent referrals.<br>✓ Regularly communicate program activities and success stories internally to raise awareness and generate leads. |

# 1.3. How can we leverage neurodiversity hiring platforms?

In response to the growth and significance of Neurodiversity@ Work initiatives, a specific category of hiring platforms emerged. Hiring platforms are websites or software as a solution that help recruiters identify talent through access to a large talent pool. People looking for a job will upload their resume or create an online profile to attract potential hiring managers. Platforms like Mentra and Neurodiversity Career Connector are good neurodiversity-specific examples. Handshake and Glassdoor are excellent examples of general hiring.

As the growth in demand for neurodivergent talent increases, specialized hiring platforms focused on the neurodivergent community are growing too. These specialized platforms recognize the unique skills offered by the community and attempt to connect neurodivergent candidates with companies that are looking for particular strengths. Many specialized hiring platforms provide support and training for both employees and employers, and some offer customized recruitment processes that make the hiring process less stressful and more accessible.

| **Make sure you are ready!** | ✓ Do you have a strong enough onboarding process to ensure that the neurodivergent employee has the right supports to be successful? <br><br> ✓ Have the teams interacting with the neurodivergent hiree participated in specific neurodivergence inclusion training, and are they aware of best practices and guidelines? <br><br> ✓ Did you customize your recruitment process, ensuring clear job descriptions, sensory-friendly workspaces, opportunities for accommodations, etc.? <br><br> ✓ Are you too enthusiastic? Make sure your systems are in place to accommodate recruitment to retention before bringing people on board. |
|---|---|
| **Assess whether a hiring platform is right for your agency** | ✓ Does the platform align with your agency's strategy, values, and goals? <br><br> ✓ Is the talent pool you are looking for on the hiring platform? Some platforms focus solely on technology; however, more than three-quarters of neurodivergent talent are in liberal arts, history, foreign languages, science, engineering, and mathematics. <br><br> ✓ Did you review Chapter 5 for detailed considerations when assessing vendors? |
| **If yes, how can you leverage them to support your initiative?** | ✓ Be clear about what needs the platform will meet. <br><br> ✓ Have clearly articulated objectives for the role the platform partner will play in your recruitment strategy. <br><br> ✓ Select the appropriate platform. (It's better if the platform does not charge the candidate to increase access!) <br><br> ✓ Engage in specialized employer training and development related to how to identify neurodivergent talent equitably through the platform. <br><br> ✓ Do not limit your recruiting to one platform or source to reach a broad and diverse audience. |

# 2 How do we engage the community?

Your community may be your best source of talent. One way to identify neurodivergent potential employees in your community is to partner with a local NGO. NGOs may already work with your target community and can refer qualified candidates. These organizations may also provide your organization with resources to support candidate transition into the workplace. Partnering with them on recruitment creates a seamless process for those candidates.

Engaging the community also consists of tapping into your organization's existing network. Leading Neurodiversity@ Work organizations and agencies generate a significant portion of their candidate pools from employees and employees' networks. Therefore, it is important to communicate within your agency to make your employees aware of your Neurodiversity@Work program and the opportunities it provides.

## KNOW YOUR COMMUNITY

To be effective in recruiting, be strategic about job ad placement and respectful of community preferences.

**Do the work to identify effective outlets — those that neurodiverse people in your community frequent or have access to.**

**Understand the language that is used in the community. Educate yourself on language preferences and be mindful in framing program information.**

# 3 How do we engage universities and colleges?

Universities and colleges can be a great source of talent. Generally, Federal agencies have existing recruiting relationships with colleges and universities nationwide. Building upon these relationships is critical to the success of college recruiting. Leading Neurodiversity@Work organizations and agencies formed fruitful relationships with universities to source talent in multiple ways. Research your local and regional universities. Identify universities and colleges that have neurodiversity-related programs to source talent, utilizing resources such as the College Autism Network, and learn about the best ways to source and support neurodivergent individuals.

To make the best of their university partnerships, leading organizations and agencies engage with:

- University-wide career services offices to reach the university at large
- Department-level career services advisers to reach specific specializations
- Work readiness programs specific to neurodiversity
- Disability resources offices
- Neurodiversity-related student organizations

Some leading firms developed deeper partnerships with educational institutions. For example, JPMorgan Chase sponsored student scholarships at the University of Delaware.

## HIGHER EDUCATION UNITS TO ENGAGE

**Career services** · **Academic units** · **Work readiness programs** · **Disability resources** · **Student organizations**

# GO BEYOND TRADITIONAL UNIVERSITY AND COLLEGE DEGREES

Neurodivergent candidates often do not fit the traditional educational pathways and qualifications required in traditional hiring practices.

☑ Reach out and explore the various types of colleges, universities, community colleges, and technical and vocational training institutes in your community.

☑ Leverage Executive Order 13932, which reduces the emphasis on educational qualifications and increases focus on specific skills and competencies. EO 13932 encourages agencies to recognize and establish alternative ways to assess job candidates' skills outside of traditional assessments and credentials (e.g., college degrees).

## LESSONS LEARNED: HOW DO WE FIND THE RIGHT TALENT?

### 1. Select the right sourcing partner.

- Build your own recruiting competency.
- Have a partner — don't go it alone. There are lots of resources outside your organization to help you mitigate risk.
- Select partners that understand your needs, values, and culture and can help identify candidates accordingly.
- There is no single spot or bench of talent that companies can go to. How well the external partners work for you can also depend on what kinds of roles are being hired for.
- Select partners that understand and have the clearance or know how to manage your security procedures.

### 2. Raise awareness of the program.

- Have a dedicated landing page for your program on your website.
- Leverage your network to raise awareness and recruit candidates.
- Partner with self-advocates at your organization to raise awareness and recruit only if they are willing.
- Do not underestimate the power of social media such as Facebook.
- Promote. Once you have an established program, work to raise visibility and interest within your organization and to get more people involved. Tout your successes.

*Note: Lessons learned are in the words of initiative staff.*

# 4 How do we make our recruitment practices neuroinclusive?

To embrace neurodiversity in your agency, you must first recognize that traditional hiring practices and methodologies may inadvertently create barriers for neurodivergent candidates to enter and advance through your recruitment process. Dismantling barriers and creating a more accessible and equitable hiring landscape benefits everyone who doesn't fit the traditional candidate mold. This shift leverages the unique perspectives, skills, and innovations that neurodivergent candidates may bring to your agency. Creating neuroinclusive recruitment practices unlocks untapped talent, fosters an inclusive and diverse culture, and ensures every individual is empowered to contribute to their fullest potential.

✓ Be mindful of unconscious bias

✓ Make your job descriptions neuroinclusive

✓ Assess neurodivergent resumes with a neuroinclusive lens

✓ Ensure accommodation requests are offered throughout the recruitment process

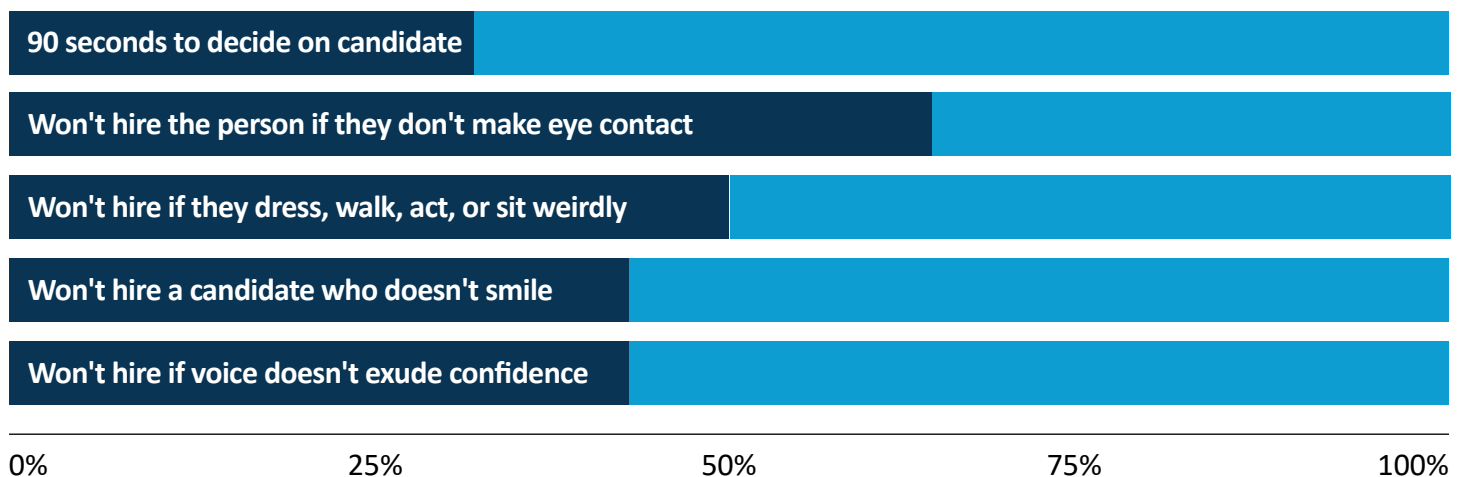✓ Identify and use best practices for outreach

## 4.1. Be mindful of unconscious bias in screening and interacting with candidates

Most talent acquisition strategies are about narrowing the candidate pool down to the most qualified and manageable list to explore more deeply. Human resource and talent acquisition team members often have to scour hundreds of resumes and multiple interviews to find the right person for the role. It's time-consuming and exhausting, causing an overreliance on social and superficial criteria rather than explicit job-related skills. This leads to often overlooking the neurodivergent candidate due to differences in how the candidate communicates, interacts socially, processes information, or moves their body. Neuroinclusive recruiters and hiring teams interpret these differences with curiosity and acceptance rather than judgment and exclusion. Neuroinclusive recruitment strategies identify skills explicitly and minimize emphasis on

normative expectations related to social interaction, types of communication, appearance, and overreliance on extroverted traits in behavior and extracurricular activities identified in resumes. It is critical for recruiters and hiring team members to participate in neurodiversity acceptance training and develop interaction and screening strategies that understand and affirm differences in body and mind across all neurotypes.

In their book "The Neurodivergent Job Candidate," Marcia Scheiner and Joan Bogden identify a range of unconscious biases that are grounded in neurotypical expectations. The graphic below illustrates the impact of neurotypical preference on hiring decisions. This bias may begin when reviewing resumes and may well carry through to the interview stage.

## SUBCONSCIOUS BIAS IN INTERVIEWS

90 seconds to decide on candidate

Won't hire the person if they don't make eye contact

Won't hire if they dress, walk, act, or sit weirdly

Won't hire a candidate who doesn't smile

Won't hire if voice doesn't exude confidence

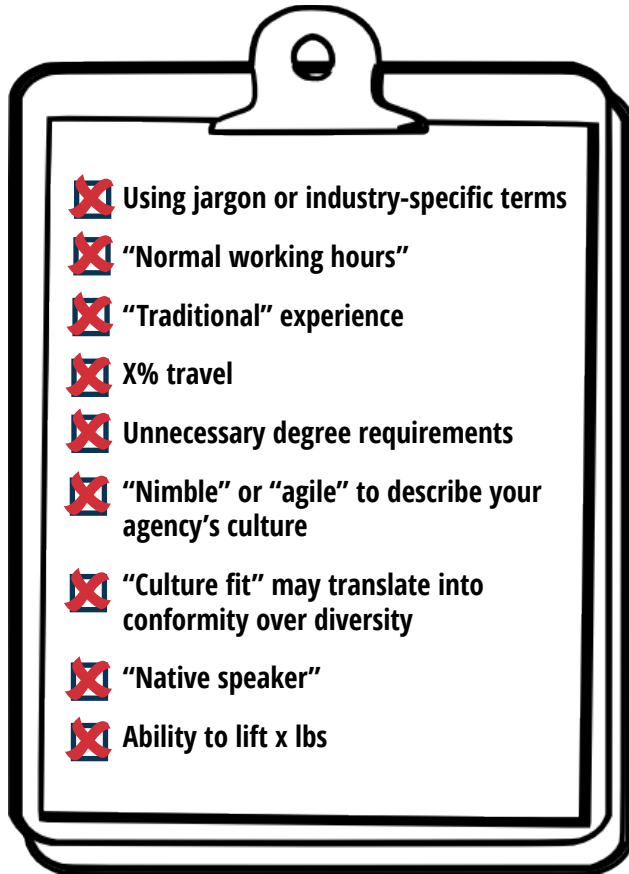| 0% | 25% | 50% | 75% | 100% |

*Source: Twin Employment & Training*

# 4.2. Make your job descriptions neuroinclusive

Exclusion of neurodivergent candidates begins with defining the role and articulating the job requirements in the job description. Be mindful of how you define the needed skills and how you signal your orientation and desire to include neur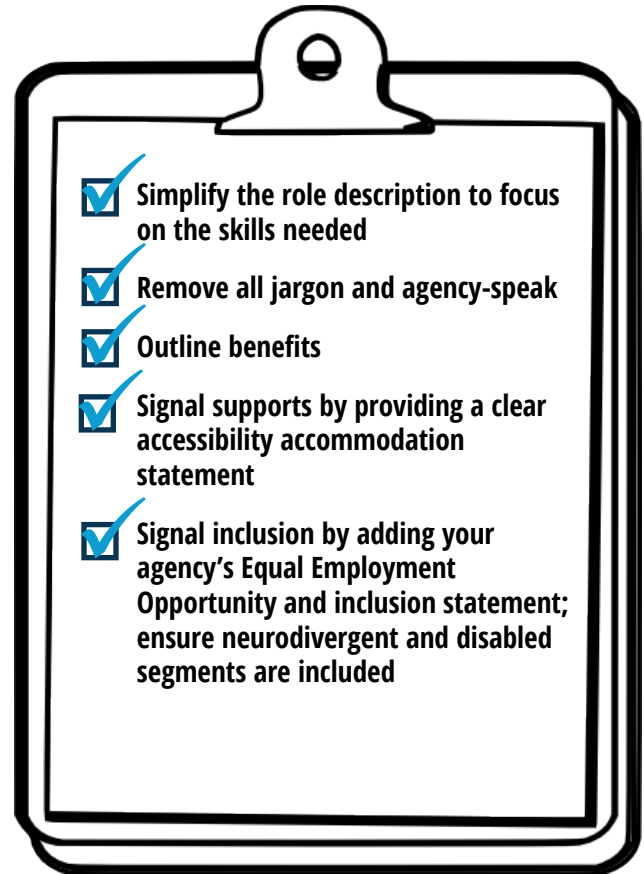odivergent candidates. Think about your current team and strategy. What skills are required to be successful? What qualifications are really required to be successful?

Agencies will have to follow hiring authority guidelines and practices and be mindful of the actions necessary to take and those to avoid.

## ACTIONS TO AVOID

- ❌ Using jargon or industry-specific terms
- ❌ "Normal working hours"
- ❌ "Traditional" experience
- ❌ X% travel
- ❌ Unnecessary degree requirements
- ❌ "Nimble" or "agile" to describe your agency's culture
- ❌ "Culture fit" may translate into conformity over diversity
- ❌ "Native speaker"
- ❌ Ability to lift x lbs

## ACTIONS TO ADOPT

- ☑ Simplify the role description to focus on the skills needed
- ☑ Remove all jargon and agency-speak
- ☑ Outline benefits
- ☑ Signal supports by providing a clear accessibility accommodation statement
- ☑ Signal inclusion by adding your agency's Equal Employment Opportunity and inclusion statement; ensure neurodivergent and disabled segments are included

# 4.3. Assess neurodivergent resumes, background checks, and skills assessment with a neuroinclusive lens

Generally speaking, neurodivergent candidate resumes and backgrounds may look different and be lacking in certain areas of importance to recruiters, and many are often considered "A"typical.

### 1. THEIR CAREER PATH DOES NOT ALIGN WITH THEIR SKILLS OR COLLEGE PATH

For one, neurodivergent candidates often have different experiences and may take alternative pathways to employment due to the many barriers in our educational systems and early employment opportunities. For many neurodivergent candidates, energy to complete a degree or other qualification is often the central focus at the expense of extracurricular and volunteer activities. Furthermore, there may be challenges to completing a degree due to limited supports and environmental constraints, and some neurodivergent candidates may take longer to complete college. They may also switch jobs more often than neurotypical candidates. Candidates who are often excluded from employment opportunities may be unemployed or underemployed despite their skills and degree level. These experiences are reflected in the resume in the following ways:

- Underemployment
- Limited volunteer and extracurricular activities.
- Multiple short-term jobs
- Volunteer work may be prominent, as they are unable to get on the employment ladder.

### 2. THEIR SKILLS ARE NOT PRESENTED WELL IN THEIR RESUMES

Some neurodivergent candidates may need more explicit support to help them contextualize their skills for the specific role to which they are applying. They may also interpret job descriptions too literally and discount the educational and volunteer experiences relevant to the work. This is reflected in their resumes in the following ways:

- They undersell themselves. For example, a candidate might have a computer science degree and a high GPA, but the resume does not list any computer languages. The neurodivergent candidate may assume the resume reviewer will realize they could not graduate with a computer science degree without knowing various languages.
- They list everything they have accomplished into their resume instead of catering to the specific job they are applying for.

When reviewing resumes, it is important to be open to alternative pathways and holistic ways to assess skills. This opens the door to various forms of talent not apparent in traditional modes but could be invaluable to your agency with the needed supports.

# 4.4. Ensure accommodation requests are offered throughout the recruitment process

Including a statement to welcome accommodation requests during hiring processes is critical to the success of any hiring initiative. Using inclusive, inviting language and providing examples of the types of support you can provide will improve your chances of identifying and hiring the right candidate. Include your statement in all communications. Check in with candidates throughout the recruitment process and ask them if there are things you can do to support them.

*Sample accommodations statement:*

**We understand everyone gets things done differently, which means some of our applicants or employees may need reasonable accommodations to ensure everyone can perform at their best. If you need accommodations, please get in touch with XXXX so you can bring your true self to our agency.**

**For an excellent example of an inviting accommodation statement, refer to Microsoft's accessibility page.**

# 4.5. Identify and use best practices for outreach

Outreach to talent aims to build trust and understanding. These require an inclusive team of recruiters who understand and respect the neurodivergent community. Ideally your team will also include neurodivergent recruiters and be designed with input from your neurodivergent employees who understand your agency and the community. Below is a list of key best practices for outreach:

✓ Neuroinclusive outreach recognizes that communication preferences vary widely by offering information in multiple, accessible formats, using clear, specific, jargon-free language.

✓ Make participation in the selection process accessible by offering candidates a choice of in-person, video, or phone interview. This widens the door for all candidates who may have difficulty attending in-person, e.g. if they are leaving their current job to attend an in-person interview.

✓ Actively and thoughtfully engage with local neurodivergent advocacy groups. This will widen your outreach and build trust in the community.

✓ Host inclusive events and workshops, both in-person and virtual. Ensure you always share an agenda before the event or meeting.

✓ Share success stories. Be mindful of creating a "neurodivergent poster child," but instead encourage willing neurodivergent employees to share their story and how your agency's flexibility allows them to thrive and contribute meaningfully.

# Interview & Selection Process

Mainstream interview and selection processes often present barriers to neurodivergent job seekers. Neurodivergent individuals may feel undue stress from assessment criteria that overemphasize social fit, include long interview days with multiple interviewers, involve white-boarding solutions, and include traveling. Furthermore, traditional interview techniques may not always uncover the interviewee's relevant skills. This leads to missed opportunities for both the individual seeking employment and the organization in need of talent.

Neurodiversity@Work initiatives introduce selection and interview processes more conducive to the needs and preferences of neurodistinct candidates. As a result, they maximize the organization's ability to uncover the talents of neurodivergent applicants and meet its talent needs. Chapter 1 elaborates on agencies' ability to transform interview processes and resources available.

In this chapter, we examine how to design an effective interview and selection process. We address the following *three questions* related to the Neurodiversity@Work interview and selection process:

▶ **How do we approach screening applicants?**
- How do we assess applicants' materials?
- What screening interview techniques do we use?
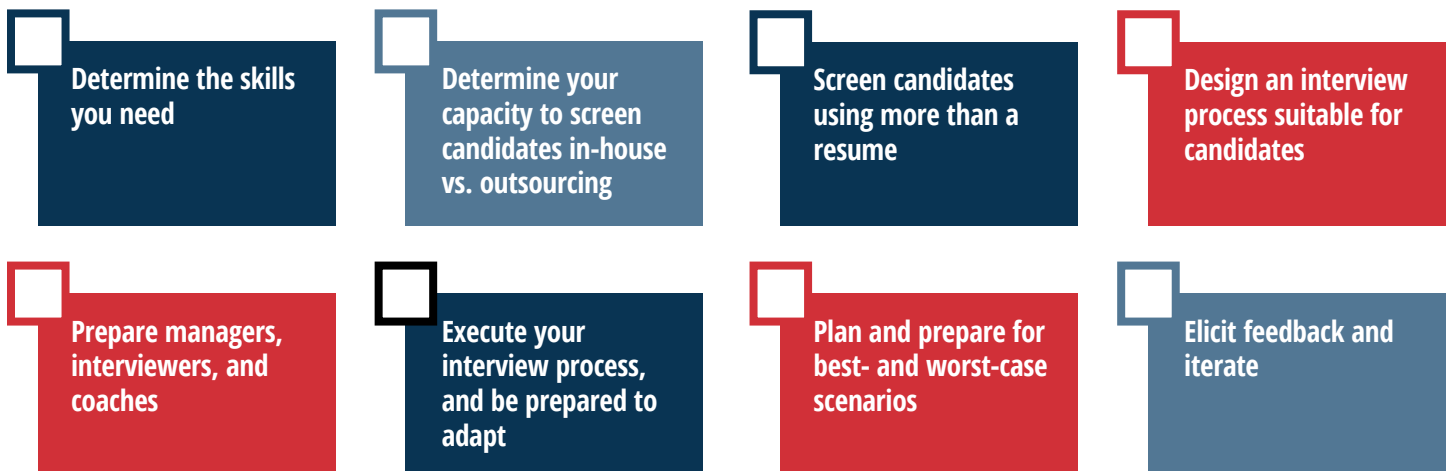- How can external partners help with screening?

▶ **How should we design our interview process?**
- How do we create a process that helps us identify talent that meets the organization's standards and adds value for the candidates?
- What interview strategies are most effective for neurodivergent individuals?
- How do we best engage hiring managers and teams?
- How do we continue to improve our interview process?

▶ **How do we manage the selection process?**
- How do we inform candidates?
- How do we support candidates who were not made offers?
- How do we keep in contact with candidates?

## INTERVIEW AND SELECTION PROCESS CHECKLIST

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| ☐ **Determine the skills you need** | ☐ **Determine your capacity to screen candidates in-house vs. outsourcing** | ☐ **Screen candidates using more than a resume** | ☐ **Design an interview process suitable for candidates** |
| ☐ **Prepare managers, interviewers, and coaches** | ☐ **Execute your interview process, and be prepared to adapt** | ☐ **Plan and prepare for best- and worst-case scenarios** | ☐ **Elicit feedback and iterate** |

# 1 How do we approach screening applicants?

Neurodiversity@Work leading organizations and agencies emphasize the importance of identifying candidates who meet the needs of the organization and have the potential to succeed. Organizations apply the same standards to identify and select candidates and develop alternative ways to uncover the desired talents through Neurodiversity@Work processes.

## 1.1. How do we assess applicants' materials?

Leading organizations and Federal agencies use various strategies to screen candidates. Screening processes may include:

- Technical skills assessment (including work sample tests)
- Standard background check
- Screening interviews

In Chapter 6, Section 4.1, we discussed unconscious biases that may influence how recruiters and hiring managers screen candidates' potential to meet the requirements of any position. Section 4.3 of that chapter outlines best practices for assessing candidates' backgrounds and resumes.

### DON'T JUDGE A BOOK BY ITS COVER

Some leading organizations emphasize the importance of not discounting candidates solely based on typical notions of what a resume should include. Many neurodivergent candidates do not fully explain or include relevant skills on their resumes.

Leading firms suggest having short "get to know the candidate" conversations with potential candidates to uncover the breadth

*If your agency and the roles under consideration require security clearance, make sure you collaborate with security units within and across agencies. As you design your screening and interview processes, account for the security clearance process, clearly communicate its constraints, and try to address its barriers. In particular, be mindful of background checks that do not account for bias in societal structures and polygraph examiners who do not understand physical and cognitive variations.*

*Candidates will need support understanding the security clearance process and navigating its various components, including background checks, financial disclosure, and polygraph examination.*

and depth of their experiences. These practices have led to a much richer candidate pool and demystified the interview processes for candidates who have limited exposure to professionals and interviews.

## 1.2. What screening interview techniques do we use?

Neurodiversity@Work organizations and agencies recommend interview techniques that are low-stress and focus on uncovering the candidate's suitability for the role, based on their ability to do the job. As discussed in Chapter 6, this requires a clear definition of the job requirements and clear rubrics and assessments that are void of irrelevant neurotypical-biased social and behavioral traits.

As you consider screening strategies, make sure you:

- ✓ Provide as many options as possible for mode of screening interviews: phone, video (OK to stay off camera), or in person.

- ✓ Allow candidates sufficient time to conduct any technical skills testing or answer questions more generally.

- ✓ Accept and give options for ways of communicating and interacting (e.g., write or sketch answers, walk and talk).

- ✓ Create a sensory environment that is conducive to the candidate's needs (noise, light, temperature, asking for preferences and allowing for adjustments).

- ✓ Reduce stress by sharing details of what is expected during the screening interview and throughout the process.

- ✓ If using video conferencing, try to use a common platform and/or provide an opportunity for the candidate to do a dry run of the platform prior to the interview.

- ✓ Interview for skills. Start with a strengths-based, skills-focused interview. Stay away from behavioral or opinion-based interview questions or brain-teasers.

- ✓ Use fact-based questions, asking candidates to reply from first-hand experience.

- ✓ Use a structured interview. Use the same questions for all candidates.

- ✓ Share the questions and interview format with the candidate in advance of the interview.

- ✓ Allow more time for candidates who need more time to process the information fully before answering.

## 1.3. How can external partners help with screening?

Organizations vary in their approaches to screening. On one hand, some organizations and agencies use a vendor to handle the entirety of the screening process up until the interview with the hiring manager. On the other hand, some organizations conduct all their screening activities in-house and have a longer screening process. Refer to Chapter 4 on sourcing to learn more about options available to your agency.

Outsourcing the screening process depends on:

| Internal resources' capacity | Compliance with agency regulation and security constraints | Maturity of the initiative | Organization's values and culture | Availability and suitability of external resources |

## 2. How should we design a neuroinclusive interview process?

Neurodiversity@Work leading firms and agencies emphasize the importance of redesigning interview processes to enable neurodivergent candidates to perform their best. They also emphasize adhering to agency-wide HR practices and standards to maintain the credibility of the initiative and the potential for broader organizational transformation. Experts within the Federal Government confirmed that agencies have latitude to create inclusive hiring processes. Refer to Chapter 1, Section 2 for more details.

The goals of the Neurodiversity@Work interview process are to:

✓ Create a process that plays to the strengths and accommodates the needs of neurodivergent individuals.

✓ Maximize the agency's ability to identify qualified candidates who do not typically do well in standard interview activities.

✓ Provide a developmental experience for candidates where they can develop technical and soft skills as a result of participating in the interview process.

> *As Neurodiversity@ Work initiatives and research grow and mature, new evidence-informed practices continue to emerge. To learn more about neuroinclusive interview design, refer to Creating the Ideal Interview Setting for Neurodivergent Candidates from SHRM.*

## 2.1. How do we create a process that helps us identify talent and adds value for the candidates?

Leading organizations and agencies that conduct their interviews in-house established holistic and developmental interview processes that involve hiring managers, team members, Neurodiversity@Work staff, Neurodiversity@Work program self-advocates, and job coaches. These types of processes allow candidates to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in ways that are conducive to them, often with a job coach available to encourage them and facilitate ways for the candidate to perform their best. Such processes allow for a more holistic assessment of candidates and provide a more meaningful developmental experience for them.

## ASPECTS OF THE INTERVIEW PROCESS

Interview processes in general include various activities that aim to introduce the candidate to the role and agency and to assess the candidate's skills and readiness for the job. Depending on the agency's practices and culture, each agency must be intentional and:

✓ Define the key skills they wish to assess

✓ Determine neuroinclusive ways to assess these skills

✓ Be clear about what to convey to the candidate to help them learn about the work they will do, the people they will work with, what the agency does, and how the agency will support their development as employees.

Therefore, the interview process may include informational elements, individual and group activities, and specific skills assessment. The topic and nature of these items may relate to soft or technical skills or to workplace culture and knowledge.

### LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

An effective interview process will help your organization find the right candidates as well as add value for the candidates who attend. Leading organizations and agencies provide mock interview training and coaching prior to interviews with hiring managers and teams to reduce anxiety and enhance the candidates' chances for success.

| TECHNICAL SKILLS | SOFT SKILLS | WORKPLACE ORIENTATION |
|---|---|---|
| • Task-related (e.g., design, coding, ledger activity)<br>• Problem-solving<br>• Productivity tools | • Communication<br>• Team collaboration<br>• Mock interview skills | • Organization's strategy<br>• Organization's values<br>• Organization's products and services<br>• Nature of the work and team |

Activities related to soft and technical skills allow candidates to develop and hone their skills. For example, most organizations include mock interviews that help candidates improve in interviews and become more comfortable. The interview process also gives the candidates a clearer idea of what it would be like to work at the firm, the nature of work they will be doing, and the types of people they will work with. Lastly, candidates have the opportunity to engage with hiring managers and job coaches who provide actionable feedback to help candidates improve their skills, regardless of the outcome of the interview process.

## INTERVIEW PROCESS DESIGN CHECKLIST

☑ Determine the skills needed for each role

☑ Design activities and assessments for desired skills

☑ Train hiring managers and all involved on neuroinclusive interview techniques

☑ Communicate expectations clearly with all involved

☑ Be specific about what you expect from each interviewer and the time commitment

☑ Design an interview process that enables neurodivergent candidates to perform their best

☑ Select physical spaces that meet candidates' various needs

☑ Build unstructured time into your interview process

☑ Build in time to debrief each day of the process

☑ Communicate to the candidates what to expect in the interview process and share the itinerary prior to the interview day/week

# UNCOVERING THE RIGHT TALENT

Identifying talent that meets the needs of the organization is key to the success of Neurodiversity@Work initiatives. The focus could be on new hires, but also on existing employees. Neuroinclusive selection and interview practices are applicable to existing employees; advancement interviews and lateral movement within the organization. To identify and place the right talent in the right job, consider the following questions and action items:

## Determine the skills needed for each role

✓ What is your baseline requirement for candidates to demonstrate?

✓ Do your candidates need to know a specific set of technical skills (e.g., accounting, SQL)?

✓ What skills will you provide training for upon hire?

### ACTION ITEM

✓ Design your assessment and activities to focus on uncovering baseline skills and the aptitude to learn them.

## Design activities and assessments for the desired skills

✓ What types of activities can uncover the skill sets desired?

✓ How can you assess social and technical skills separately?

✓ Should the skill be assessed in an individual activity or in a group context?

✓ What technology is needed?

✓ What elements of the activity may introduce stress for the individual? How can you change or eliminate those dimensions?

### ACTION ITEMS

✓ Use structured interviews to keep interviewers focused on your specific objectives.

✓ Be specific in your purpose and instructions.

✓ Allow enough time for activities and account for differences in processing time between candidates.

✓ Provide alternative ways for the candidate to accomplish tasks (e.g., let them work on their laptop rather than the whiteboard if they choose, let them write or sketch their answer).

✓ Use debriefing time with candidates to see how they think and how they want to approach the task.

✓ Elicit advice from current neurodivergent and Neurodiversity@Work employees in similar roles. They will provide important insights.

## 2.2. What interview strategies are most effective for neurodivergent individuals?

Neurodiversity@Work initiatives must devise interview process activities that meet the styles and preferences of neurodivergent individuals. There is great diversity in the types of activities and assessments that firms utilize that address the specific skill sets they are looking to uncover in ways that cater to the needs of their candidates. See Table 7.1 for more information.

*Design an interview process that enables candidates to perform their best and showcase their talents.*

Developing a flexible interview process (for recruitment, advancement, and lateral movement) is key for recruiting and retaining neurodivergent employees. Traditional interview and hiring methods are often ineffective at assessing and leveraging the diversity of talents and perspectives of neurodivergent candidates. As you design your interview process and techniques, keep in mind that the need for specific accommodations will vary between groups and individuals. Taking a flexible approach allows you to tailor your accommodations to meet candidates' needs. Remember, each agency is encouraged to devise strategies that align with the agency's needs, guidelines, and culture (refer to Chapter 6).

**KEY QUESTIONS**

What types of activities allow candidates to demonstrate the skills needed in a way that is catered to their preferences and needs?

What are the sensory needs of your candidates?

What are the best ways to reduce stress and anxiety?

*Communicating expectations and the details of the interview process reduces stress and anxiety about the unknown. This helps candidates prepare mentally. It also allows job coaches to work with candidates to identify their needs as they relate to the itinerary and identify accommodations that will enable them to perform their best.*

# INTERVIEW DESIGN PROCESS

**As you design your interview process, consider the following strategies relevant to key interview stages:**

## 1. Pre-interview

### Communicate to the candidates about what to expect during the interview process.

- Share the itinerary prior to the interview day/week.
- Check with the candidate ahead of time to see what accommodations they specifically need.
- Send clear instructions about the interview process, including the location, dress code, who they will interview with, a time-line for the interview, and the topics they will be asked to address.
- Consider providing the candidate with a list of interview questions in advance.
- Consider allowing the candidate to visit (in person or virtually) the interview location prior to the day of the interview to increase familiarity with the environment. This will reduce anxiety, inform accommodations needed, and lower distractions on the actual interview day.

### Work with the candidate to help them identify their accommodation needs.

- Ask the candidate what time of day they prefer to interview and offer to break up the interview process across multiple days if needed.
- Work with job coaches and candidates to identify candidate accommodation needs in advance and plan logistics for support accordingly.
- Identify what assessment styles might work best for the candidate (e.g., work trials, practical assessments, or mini-apprenticeships).

### Make all your interview materials explicit and available beforehand.

- Develop specific written and verbal instructions for all interview activities.
- Seek feedback from self-advocates and Neurodiversity@Work employees within your organization to improve instructions.
- Communicate details of the interview and expectations with all internal and external parties involved.

## 2. Day of interview

### Be flexible and prepared to adapt

- Expect the unexpected.
- Plan for multiple scenarios and be ready to change.
- As you change and adapt, let your interviewers know what is expected of them.

### Select physical spaces that meet your candidates' various needs.

- Be mindful of sensory sensitivity (hyper and hypo).
- Choose a location to conduct the interview with low sensory input and minimal distractions.

### Build unstructured time into your interview process.

- Unstructured time in the interview process is important for candidates and your Neurodiversity@Work staff.
- It is essential to provide unstructured time to manage the potential for sensory sensitivity and cognitive overload.
- For your staff, it also avoids potential for cognitive overload and gives them an opportunity to adjust and be more responsive to the candidates and interviewers.

# INTERVIEW DESIGN PROCESS

**Be mindful of language use and how you frame interview questions.**

- Use literal language instead of idioms/implied meanings.
- Ask one question at a time and avoid double-barreled questions.
- Confirm that the person understands your questions or instructions.
- Ask questions specific to the skill set you are assessing.
- Do not ask off-the-wall questions (e.g., "If you were a fruit, what would you be and why?").
- Ask for specific examples of something rather than general or hypothetical questions.
- Let the candidate know they can ask for extra time to answer a question or have it rephrased if needed.

**Design interviews tailored to the preferences of neurodivergent individuals.**

- Conduct interviews in 45-minute increments.
- Limit the number of interviewers or have only one interviewer present at a time.
- Allow the interviewee to bring notes into the interview or take notes during the interview (and provide time for them to refer to the notes).
- Provide a break during the interview.
- Allow a support person (like a job coach) or support animal to be present if the candidate wishes.
- Ask candidates if they prefer to sit or walk around if needed.
- Allow the interviewee to bring their own computer for computer-based competency assessments.
- Allow candidates to use prior work to demonstrate skills (e.g., portfolios, products).

**Use job coaches to provide support for candidates during the interview process.**

- Let the job coaches be present during the interview.
- Job coaches help candidates perform their best by helping them identify and advocate for their needs.
- Job coaches also help candidates identify and resolve conflict and manage stress.
- Job coaches give candidates clear and explicit feedback about their performance and ways to improve.

## 3. Post-interview

**Build in debrief time for staff and interviewers to regroup.**

- Build in regular debrief time at the end or beginning of each day.
- Built-in debrief times allows you to regroup and address needed changes without falling behind.

**Provide constructive feedback and other development opportunities to candidates if possible.**

- Consider alternative assessment styles such as work trials, practical assessments, or mini-apprenticeships
- Follow up with written and verbal communication
- In cases where a candidate is working with a job coach, ensure that they give candidates constructive, explicit feedback about their performance and ways to improve.

## 2.3. How do we best engage hiring managers and teams?

Leading Neurodiversity@Work organizations that carry out their selection process in-house train hiring managers and team members on the goals of the interview process and effective interview techniques for neurodiverse individuals. The length and content of the training vary for each agency and organization, but at the very least, it is designed to give managers and colleagues a baseline level of neurodiversity acceptance and set expectations for how the interview process and specific activities will be carried out.

In addition to raising awareness of neurodiversity and effective strategies to interview potential candidates, Neurodiversity@Work staff recommend the following strategies for preparing interviewers:

✓ Communicate expectations clearly with all involved.

✓ Be specific about what you expect from each interviewer and the time commitment.

✓ Be realistic in your requests and don't underestimate what you are asking them to commit to (e.g., in which parts of the multi-day interview process do you want them to participate and how?).

**Neurodiversity acceptance training relevant to interviewers:**

✓ Online training.

✓ In-person training.

✓ Instructional materials prepared by Neurodiversity@Work staff.

✓ Role play and mock interviews for managers and team members.

### WHEN ENGAGING INTERVIEWERS

☐ Communicate expectations

☐ Be specific

☐ Be realistic

☐ Be supportive
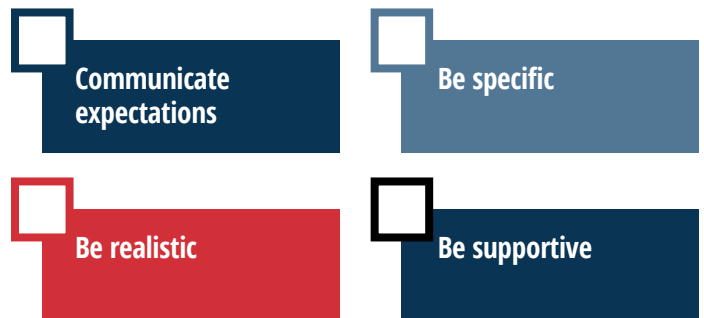
## 2.4. How do we continue to improve our selection process?

Leading Neurodiversity@Work initiatives continually refine and improve their selection process by seeking and incorporating feedback from candidates and interviewers. They make it a priority to learn from candidates and existing neurodivergent employees to make improvements to their interview and selection processes. This is the case across all initiative models, whether they are using a Lighthouse model or a Business Transformation Model. Initiative leaders and staff recognize that Neurodiversity@Work practices continue to evolve as initiatives and research matures in this area and are open to learning and evolving over time.

*Benefits carry over: Hiring managers who participate in Neurodiversity@Work interview processes transfer best practices to mainstream hiring and benefit a wider range of employees and candidates.*

Organizations and agencies explained that they made many changes in the initial phases of the program. As the initiatives matured, there were fewer iterations as best practices emerged and existing neurodistinct employees provided feedback.

## 3 How do we manage the selection process?

Leading Neurodiversity@Work employers emphasize the developmental focus of their interview programs. Therefore, they suggest paying special care and attention to how feedback and decisions regarding hiring are communicated to candidates. These organizations suggest a few key practices to consider:

● Adhere to your agency's HR practices.

● Communicate feedback with the job coach present to provide the candidate support.

● Communicate feedback regarding performance in-person or through video conferencing to communicate the message more holistically.

● Communicate developmental feedback regarding areas for improvement regardless of decision to hire. Make the feedback clear and actionable.

## KEEP THE DOOR OPEN

Some organizations encourage applicants who were not successful in their first try to apply in the future after they have developed their areas for improvement. They also maintain the contact information of these candidates and reach out to them when they see possible opportunities that are suitable for their skills.

## EXPECT THE BEST; PLAN FOR THE UNEXPECTED

Neurodiversity@Work candidates will respond differently to hiring decisions. Agencies must be ready with the proper support (e.g., having a job coach present) and an actionable communication strategy to respond to candidates who may be distressed regarding the hiring decisions. Agencies also should prepare for any actions the candidates may take. Have a response plan for different scenarios and communicate it with relevant parties.

## LESSONS LEARNED: HOW DO WE FIND THE CANDIDATES FOR US?

### 1. Engage the hiring team.

- Involve members of the hiring team in the interview process.
- Don't underestimate what you're asking managers to commit to. Be specific and realistic in your requests.
- Communicate the role hiring team members will play and be specific about their time commitment.

### 2. Be flexible, elicit feedback, and iterate.

- Be flexible and ready to adapt to the needs of the hiring team as well as the needs of your candidates.
- Elicit feedback from candidates and current program employees to improve your interview design.
- There should absolutely be involvement from neurodiverse employees in the iteration process.
- Elicit feedback from hiring managers regarding interview activities as well as the performance of employees hired through the program.
- Institute a formal feedback process for the candidates after the interviews are complete. Send a survey both electronically and in-person in the office.

### 3. Design the interview process carefully.

- Providing structure to the interview makes the interviewee and interviewer more focused and more comfortable.
- Make sure the candidate knows who is coming to the interview, what the process will be like, and broad topics of questions they will be asked, and assure them that there will be no surprise questions.
- Be willing to customize the process for the candidate.
- Build in debrief time for interviewers, candidates and Neurodiversity@Work staff on a daily basis during interview week.
- Build in unstructured time.

### 4. Add value to the agency and the candidates.

- Ensure that all candidates receive feedback on their assessment, regardless of how well they do. This also applies to your response to candidates after the conclusion of an interview week, to give them actionable and clear feedback.
- Processes that have been created for neurodiverse candidates can often be applied to mainstream corporate practices.

*Note: Lessons learned are in the words of initiative staff.*

# Table 7.1: Summary of interview process best practices across leading organizations and agencies

| WHO IS INVOLVED? | HOW IS SCREENING CONDUCTED? | WHAT IS THE INTERVIEW PROCESS LIKE? |
|---|---|---|
| • Business unit leaders, hiring managers, team members<br>• Human resources, talent acquisition<br>• Neurodiversity@Work team<br>• Current neurodivergent employees and relevant employee resource group members<br>• External partners, including job coaches | • Screening/qualifying interview (by phone, online, or in-person)<br>• Technical skills assessment | The process varies based on the organization and roles. It may take any one or a combination of the following:<br><br>• Multi-day Interview: The candidate gets to know the organization, and the organization gets to know the candidate in a more relaxed and in-depth manner.<br>• Screening (call and/or technical skills assessment) followed by "super" days with multiple interviews held in one day in different formats. |

| WHAT TYPES OF ACTIVITIES MAY TAKE PLACE DURING THE INTERVIEW PROCESS? | | WHAT TYPES OF ACCOMMODATIONS ARE TYPICALLY PROVIDED? |
|---|---|---|
| • Learning about the organization<br>• Skills/technical assessment<br>• Collaborative activities<br>• In-person/virtual training<br>• Review of the candidate's preferred communication styles<br>• Interviews can include 1:1s, panels of interviewers, or weeklong performance reviews ("interview week")<br>• Soft-skills exercises<br>• Meet-and-greets<br>• Mock interviews<br>• Resume, portfolio, interview tip sessions<br>• Feedback opportunities, for the candidate and the organization | | • Customized accommodations according to candidates' needs.<br>• Agenda, who the interviewer will be, and interview questions in advance<br>• Choice of online or in-person<br>• "Super" days, scheduled sensory breaks, quiet rooms<br>• Ensure every interviewer is trained (neurodiversity acceptance training and interview best-practices training)<br>• Provided job coaches if requested<br>• Technological tools or software (noise-canceling headphones, speech-to-text software, etc.)<br>• Catering to communication style differences and needs (verbal vs. written communication)<br>• Post-interview support (two-way feedback, resources, potential accommodations that may help the new employee in their transition into the role) |

# Training

The success of Neurodiversity@Work initiatives is contingent on the readiness of organizations to welcome and equitably include neurodivergent employees, as well as the readiness of neurodivergent candidates to transition into the workplace. Training is an essential component of creating an inclusive work environment and giving both neurodiverse individuals and their potential managers and colleagues the awareness and tools to be effective collaborators. Training aims to build the capacity of organizations to be neuroinclusive, which requires ongoing learning and engagement and is not a one-time event.

This chapter addresses the training required of the organization as a whole to create a welcoming and inclusive workplace for neurodivergent employees. It also contains information about the type of training organizations provide to their new neurodivergent hires to facilitate their transition into the workplace. When planning training for your program, consider the following *three key questions* to guide your efforts:

▶ **How should we prepare our neurodivergent candidates for the workplace?**
- What type of training should we provide for neurodivergent hires entering the workplace?
- What training design considerations should we keep in mind to make both the training and the transition neuroinclusive?

▶ **How should we prepare managers and colleagues?**
- What type of training should we provide for our neurotypical managers and workers to welcome and include their new colleagues?
- What training design considerations should we keep in mind for our existing workforce?

▶ **Who can we turn to for training?**
- What types of providers provide training?
- How should we assess vendors on their training capabilities?

▶ **How should we assess and improve our training?**
- What impact will our training have?
- How do we elicit feedback and continue improvements?

## TRAINING CHECKLIST

✓ Identify training needs for new hires, managers, teams, and functional area personnel (e.g., HR, talent acquisition), considering both technical and collaboration/soft-skills requirements

✓ Determine the availability and suitability of mainstream training that may meet broader technical and soft-skills needs

✓ Design training sessions with clear learning objectives, tailored for different learner groups

✓ Decide how you will deliver neurodiversity acceptance training (in-house or using a vendor)

✓ Partner with self-advocates as you develop and grow your initiative

✓ Tap into internal and external resources to deliver training

✓ Determine what training(s) are optional and what are required and why.

✓ Decide what form the training will take (once or recurring, online or in-person, individual or team)

✓ Work closely with a job coach (when needed) to provide new hires with needed transition skills and support

✓ Decide how you will assess the training

# 1 How should we prepare our neurodivergent candidates to transition into the workplace?

Neurodiversity@Work leading firms provide a variety of training opportunities to their new hires that aim to enhance both technical and work-readiness skills. New hires may receive training through any or all of the following:

- Initiative-specific training
- The organization's mainstream training requirements and opportunities
- Training on transition and work readiness skills particular to the hiree's needs and desires. This could be provided by job coaches, external partner programs, or college and university programs.

## FACTORS INFLUENCING TRAINING

The focus and delivery method of training depend on various factors, including the needs of the hiree; the types of roles individuals hold or are being hired into; how candidates are being recruited; the availability and appropriateness of training through mainstream channels; and in some cases, the geographic location of the program, which determines the availability of external partners.

It is critical for any agency to be intentional in identifying the skills and tools necessary for success of their new hires and existing employees, neurotypical and neurodivergent alike. In general, training may be geared toward technical skills or orientation to the organization and interpersonal skills:

Needs of the hirees

Roles

Location

Recruitment

Mainstream training
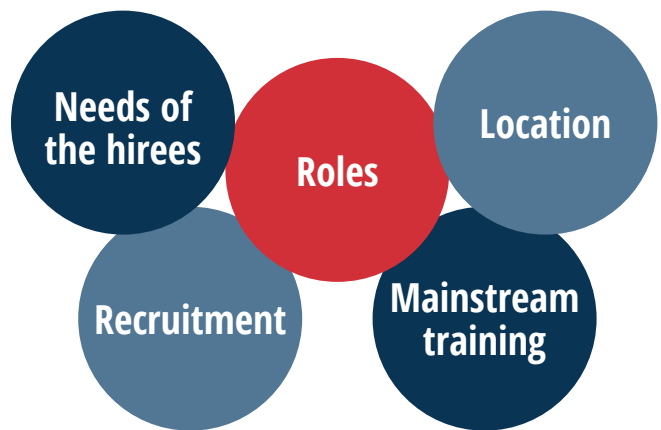
## TECHNICAL SKILLS TRAINING

- ✓ Focuses on specific technical skills relevant to the role the candidate will assume
- ✓ Focuses on collaboration or productivity techniques and tools
- ✓ May be offered as part of mainstream onboarding as standard training required of all new hires
- ✓ May be offered as a development activity driven by the candidate and their manager or job coach
- ✓ May be offered during the interview process to equip candidates with technical skills needed for the roles they will assume
- ✓ May be offered as a unique training opportunity for Neurodiversity@Work new hires only

## ORIENTATION TO THE ORGANIZATION & INTERPERSONAL SKILLS

- ✓ Provides an overview of the organization's mission, values, strategy, and products
- ✓ Orients new hires to activities and resources available to support them
- ✓ Provides insight into a day in the life of an employee to minimize anxiety and prepare new hires for their jobs
- ✓ May be offered as part of mainstream onboarding as standard training required of all new hires
- ✓ May be offered during the interview process to equip candidates with soft skills needed for the roles they assume

# ACCESSIBILITY AND INCLUSIVITY OF TRAINING

The tone and form of training must reinforce a strength-based orientation to neurodiversity. Whether you are leveraging in-person interactive training, online synchronous training, or on-demand asynchronous online training, you should consider the various forms of accessibility:
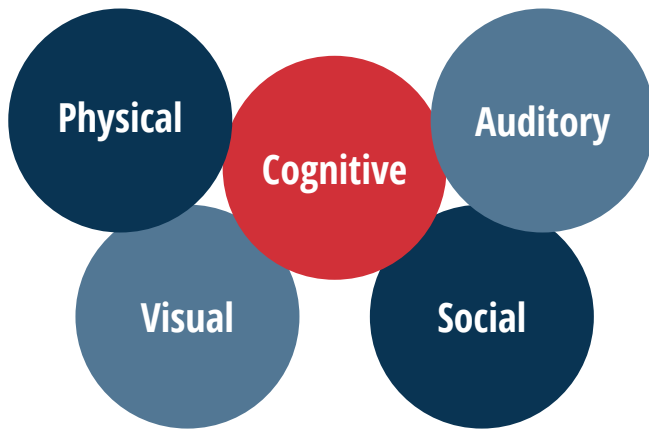


*Managers and employees at leading agencies and private organizations state that managers who participate in neurodiversity acceptance training become better managers for all employees. All team members — managers and colleagues — should receive acceptance and neuroinclusion communication and collaboration training. Managers should also receive separate training before they participate in the neurodiversity hiring program interview process.*

**When should you use mainstream training vs. Neurodiversity@Work-specific training?**

- It depends on the skills you are targeting and suitability of the training available in the organization.
- Consider whether a mainstream training format will be conducive to your employee's needs.
- Develop Neurodiversity@Work training in-house or use a partner for skills specific to the transition to the workplace and team collaboration or team-building techniques.
- Partner with your neurodivergent self-advocates to lead or co-lead some of your training.

## 2 How should we prepare our neurotypical managers and colleagues?

Developing Neurodiversity@Work initiatives necessitates that we create a workplace that is welcoming and inclusive for neurodivergent individuals. Inclusion requires that neurodivergent employees, their managers, and colleagues learn to communicate, collaborate, and socialize effectively together. The onus of doing so must not be on the neurodivergent individual. Rather, the onus must be distributed to the agency at large, particularly to managers and team members.

Raising awareness of neurodiversity culture, as well as learning effective collaboration strategies across differences, is important to the success of your program. Most leading Neurodiversity@Work organizations require that managers and team members participate in training.

# TYPES OF TRAINING



Neurodiversity acceptance

Neurodiversity as culture

Collaboration

Interview preparation

Communication

Team management

Creating psychological safety for teams

Hidden curriculum (the unwritten rules in the organization)

Managers, team members, mentors, and others key to the recruitment and retention of neurodivergent individuals should receive training. For Neurodiversity Hiring Programs and Lighthouse Models, training must take place prior to the new hire's start date. Training may be provided online or in person and developed in-house or outsourced to a vendor. See resources in Appendix A.

Some organizations stress that in-person interactive team training is the most effective, but budget constraints may lead to the use of online training. Organizations found success in both developing their own training and bringing in outside vendors. What is key is addressing the needs of all employees

and managers consistently as the teams mature and the diversity of team needs change over time.

Changes of managers and changes in teams may introduce undue stress to Neurodiversity@Work employees. Program leaders must remain mindful of changes and provide appropriate training to new managers and team members. The employee's privacy preferences should always remain a priority as you inform new managers and team members. Refer to the Neurodiversity@Work Employee Engagement and Growth Series Playbooks for additional information on neuroinclusion, managing change, and other topics.

# 3 Who can we turn to for training?

Credible and effective training is essential for the success of your initiative, so determining the right resources is crucial. Self-advocates and internal subject matter experts within the agency can provide firsthand knowledge and tailored insights. With the below options, effective training is within reach and budget and will safeguard the success of your Neurodiversity@Work initiative.

Chapter 5 explored external sourcing. Training options specifically include:

- External training consultants or firms bring specialized expertise.
- Online learning platforms offer convenient access to a range of generic modules and courses.
- Professional associations, NGOs, and industry groups offer valuable resources and workshops tailored to neuroinclusion.
- Universities and educational institutions may provide customized training programs.

## HOW SHOULD WE ASSESS VENDORS' TRAINING CAPABILITIES?

In Chapter 5, we included a set of considerations for assessing neuroinclusion external partners. Below are a few additional considerations to assist you in critically assessing the capacity of a potential vendor to deliver impactful training.

- ☑ Assess the qualifications and experience of their trainers or instructors.
- ☑ Consider whether the potential partner's team includes neurodivergent leaders and trainings.
- ☑ Review their track record to gauge their impact and reputation. Ask for client references.

- ☑ Evaluate the relevance of their training content and materials against the outcomes you are looking to achieve.
- ☑ Request a demo, outline, or sample training session to experience their teaching style and approach.
- ☑ Are they partnered with organizations that demonstrate they have expertise and credibility in the market?

# 4 How should we assess and improve our training?

As Neurodiversity@Work initiatives remain relatively new, iterating on initiative activities is key to improving them. Organizations use a range of formal and informal feedback mechanisms to assess the efficacy of the training provided. Most assessments are focused on relevance, impact, perceived usefulness, self-efficacy, and engagement level. Most good learning platforms also provide immediate feedback related to retention, perceived efficacy, and satisfaction with the training. Some organizations also are in the process of establishing broader impact mechanisms to assess team effectiveness post training. Most initiatives also focus on informal feedback from trainees, which is often extremely valuable and has had broader implications for their effectiveness as managers and colleagues.

Consider gathering feedback and performing assessments using survey tools attached to online training and at the completion of in-person sessions. The feedback mechanism should be one that you determine to be most suitable for your agency and initiative goals. The training and feedback mechanism that works for your agency may also depend on scalability.

## MAKE TRAINING AN ONGOING OFFERING

It is critical to make training a key offering within your initiative. Creating an inclusive culture and reinforcing effective practices requires continuous learning and growth. Consider how to provide continuous improvement, training, and development for all parties. Some suggested tactics:

☑ Host monthly seminars for Neurodiversity@Work program hirees.

☑ Consider a community of practice for managers to provide a forum for sharing knowledge and lessons learned, and for providing additional training.

☑ Host a Neurodiversity@Work intranet site where you can share relevant training and development articles, as well as success stories and program activities.

☑ Create acceptance campaigns to highlight best practices and reinforce the impact of neuroinclusion on your organization.

## LESSONS LEARNED: WHAT ARE THE TRAINING CONSIDERATIONS?

- Partner with a local NGO to provide the training; don't think that you need to create the training internally.
- It is critical to be very conscientious about privacy throughout the lifespan of the program (e.g., ask people if they want to be in the CC or the BCC of emails about Neurodiversity@Work, and share their needs and not identities).
- Meet in the middle — accept individuals for who they are rather than asking them to pretend to be neurotypical.
- Customize and adjust your approach and resources based on the locale. Some locales have more neurodiversity-related expertise and support systems.
- Customize training based on the types of roles required.
- In-person training for teams and managers is more effective, but it is also costlier.
- Have a Neurodiversity@Work intranet page. Continuously post articles and updates on what the team is doing to increase visibility throughout the agency.
- Get public support from senior leadership to promote attendance at the required and optional training.

*Note: Lessons learned are in the words of initiative staff.*

# Onboarding & Support

Effective onboarding leads to higher employee satisfaction, engagement, and retention. Onboarding and long-term support are especially important for neurodivergent employees, as they often face challenges transitioning into a new workplace and navigating the "hidden curriculum." Socialization processes can be overwhelming for anyone, and neurotypical employees and managers may not always know how to be inclusive and welcoming of neurodivergent colleagues. Therefore, organizations wishing to implement Neurodiversity@Work initiatives that aim to hire neurodivergent workers or be more inclusive of current ones must be deliberate in their design of onboarding processes.

In this section, we provide a road map for agencies interested in onboarding neurodivergent employees effectively and providing them with the support structures necessary for their transition into the workplace. This section addresses the following *three key questions* related to onboarding Neurodiversity@Work hires:

▶ **How do we prepare our organization to welcome and include our new hires?**
  - How do we prepare managers to lead and include our new hires effectively?
  - How do we prepare teams to welcome and work effectively with our new hires?
  - What type of ongoing support will managers and teams need?

▶ **How should we onboard new hires?**
  - What does onboarding involve?
  - What specific considerations and accommodations should we plan for?
  - How do we support our new hires logistically?

▶ **How can we best support our new hires?**
  - What supports and services can we provide employees?
  - What are employee support circles?
  - What internal and external partners can help support our employees?
  - What role could each partner play in supporting our employees?

## ONBOARDING AND SUPPORT CHECKLIST

✓ Cultivate a neuroinclusive culture

✓ Build capacity by training managers and teams

✓ Work within but augment mainstream HR processes

✓ Develop an explicit onboarding plan for new hires

✓ Communicate your onboarding plan with the new hire, their manager, and the job coach

✓ Work closely with the job coach and HR to determine specific accommodations needed

✓ Identify the support circle for the new hire if they desire one

# 1 How do we best prepare our agency to welcome and include our new hires?

Creating a neuroinclusive culture that welcomes neurodivergent individuals and provides them the opportunity to succeed and flourish is essential to the success of Neurodiversity@Work initiatives. Cultivating a neuroinclusive culture takes time, investment, deliberate action, and self-assessment. It begins with recognizing that our workplaces are designed to meet the needs and preferences of dominant identities. This presents explicit and implicit barriers for neurodivergent people, who may behave and work differently than normative expectations. For organizations to truly provide equal opportunities for neurodivergent people, they must cultivate a culture of inclusion that recognizes, in meaningful ways, that neurodivergent people's ways of being are valuable to the organization. For guidance on how to develop a neuroinclusive culture, refer to the Neurodiversity@Work Playbook Employee Engagement and Growth Series Issue #1: Cultivating Neuroinclusive Culture.

Preparing managers and team members to welcome and work effectively with their neurodiverse team members is key to creating a neuroinclusive culture. The onus of learning how to work effectively in neurodiverse teams (including neurotypical and neurodivergent people) is the responsibility of all involved. For this reason, Neurodiversity @Work leading organizations require training for managers and teams. Training aims to build acceptance of neurodiversity and neurodivergent culture without disclosing the identities of new hires, as well as to promote effective collaboration and management practices. Some agencies rely on external neuroinclusion partners for this training, while others rely on self-advocates who specialize in delivering such training. As initiatives mature, some agencies develop in-house training and leverage their internal self-advocates to deliver it. Refer to Chapter 8, Training, for details.

## HOW TO CULTIVATE NEUROINCLUSION COMPETENCY

*From the Neurodiversity@Work Playbook Employee Engagement and Growth Series.*

☑ Design and develop training that is congruent with your organization's values and practices.

☑ Do not rely on a one-time-only training to reinforce inclusive and effective practices.

☑ Provide training on a logical and regular basis.

☑ Design duration and cadence that is conducive to various groups' schedules and workloads.

☑ Arrange topics in order of relevance and timeliness.

☑ Conduct training that builds a neuroinclusive culture of true acceptance and changes attitudes.

☑ Go beyond awareness training and offer work practice training relevant to cross-cultural communication, collaboration techniques, meeting etiquette, conflict resolution, and other teamwork in neurodiverse team skills.

Remember that during the planning phase of the initiative, it is important that the neurodiversity hiring team engage more frequently with advocates, managers, and team members in order to provide support and elicit feedback. Some organizations met with managers on a weekly basis to provide needed support and to learn how to improve initiative features and support. As the program matures, knowledge grows among managers and colleagues. The support needs will evolve to focus on inclusion, conflict resolution, advancement, and other managerial issues. Neurodiversity@Work staff continues to engage coaches and external partners to meet needs that are beyond the capacity of the organization and agency.

## TRAINING GOALS

To raise acceptance of neurodiversity and neurodivergent culture without disclosing the identities of new hires and to provide knowledge of effective collaboration practices.

# 2 How should we onboard new hires?

Neurodiversity@Work leading organizations and agencies leverage existing mainstream processes and resources for the standard required onboarding, such as regulatory information, benefits, security procedures, and the introduction to the organization. Additional support and onboarding specifics, however, are necessary to ensure a welcoming and more effective onboarding of Neurodiversity@Work employees. Leading agencies and private organizations develop neuroinclusive onboarding plans to augment mainstream processes to meet the needs of new neurodivergent employees. This is applicable to employees new to the organization as well as to neurodivergent employees who are making lateral and upward moves within the organization.

In particular, onboarding logistics and navigating standard onboarding activities can be overwhelming when there is a lack of clarity regarding what is expected of the new hire. Leading Neurodiversity@Work organizations pay special care to logistical support, using an approach in which they, in collaboration with job coaches when present, provide specific and individualized attention to the needs and preferences of the new hire. The focus is on creating an explicit pathway to onboarding, and an opportunity for the team to realign expectations of how they work and communicate together. This practice is applicable to all teams when a new member joins.

A key success factor we learned from leading organizations and agencies is the development of specific and well-communicated onboarding plans for new hires (incoming team members). The onboarding plan must:

- Augment mainstream processes in order to provide the necessary support.
- Be specific to employee needs and team context.
- Provide specific expectations and details.
- Be communicated to all relevant personnel, including HR, managers, facilities, and the team's point of contact.

## THE JOB COACH

In some cases, Neurodiversity@Work initiatives leverage external neuroinclusion partners and resources to provide job coaches to new employees. These coaches and sources vary in background and orientation to supporting the employee. Not all candidates need a job coach or wish to have one.

Job coaches may play a key role in the employee's onboarding, collaborating closely with the Neurodiversity@Work initiative staff. In collaboration with HR, job coaches assist new hires in preparing for their transition to the workplace, completing their paperwork, and preparing for their first day. Job coaches may also be leveraged for support and development throughout the employee's career.

# ONBOARDING PLAN CHECKLIST

**Communicate logistics**

- ✓ Ensure you understand the individual's specific needs and agree on communication preferences.
- ✓ Determine the date that works for the individual and team.
- ✓ Communicate the date, time, and place to report, and the name and contact information of the assigned point of contact and/or the job coach.
- ✓ To communicate effectively, simplify the information, ensure directions are clear, and be willing to repeat information if requested by the new hire.
- ✓ Allow for two-way communication. Be flexible and willing to adjust logistics if the new hire shares that the existing plan will not work for them or that accommodations will be necessary.
- ✓ Confirm that any requested accommodations are met and that the hiree's workspace and computer are ready.

**Be explicit about logistics and expectations**

- ✓ Provide a map of the office and seating arrangements (address, building, floor, specific location within the office). Some Neurodiversity@Work organizations create short videos with cellphones to show employees their space.
- ✓ Designate the person to report to and other key staff.
- ✓ Explain the dress code.
- ✓ Tell them what to bring, including personal information for benefits, insurance, etc.
- ✓ Give an itinerary for the first day/week.
- ✓ Provide directions on how different areas of the office are used (creative areas, meeting places, social spaces, the "good" bathroom, quiet spaces, etc.)
- ✓ Include a primer on office etiquette and policies.
- ✓ Provide a summary of any paperwork or tasks that will need to be completed beforehand.

**Provide a range of supports and mentorship**

- ✓ If the new hire desires one, find a mentor/buddy who can help them settle into their job role and agency culture.
- ✓ Adapt your career coaching, mentoring, and buddy programs. See below for more about mentoring resources.
- ✓ If the employee engages in mentoring, assess mentors' and mentees' objectives and needs, compatibility and interests, personalities, working and communication styles, career stage, and experience, and always allow for feedback and adjustment.
- ✓ Define what you expect from each person explicitly, both to the new hire and to those in support roles (e.g., mentors, buddies, coaches).
- ✓ Be specific about your expectations regarding time, boundaries, roles, etc.
- ✓ Communicate your expectations early.
- ✓ Don't overload the new hire with introductions and excessive information on the first day.
- ✓ Provide the option for a one-on-one onboarding experience with online and in-person training options rather than onboarding in a group format.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Prepare the team** | ✓ Provide teams and managers with training while maintaining the privacy of the new hire's neurodivergence.<br>✓ Learn how to break down tasks into smaller pieces.<br>✓ Figure out how to help the new hire prioritize tasks. For example, do they have to read all corporate communications or do team projects take priority?<br>✓ Focus on neurodiversity acceptance and promote effective collaboration and clear, specific communication practices.<br>✓ Emphasize psychological safety for the entire team.<br>✓ Approach the onboarding process as an opportunity for the team to realign expectations and create common understanding/agreement of team practices.<br>✓ Establish standard check-in meetings and reviews, adapting frequency accordingly.<br>✓ Put the onus of change and inclusion on the agency, not the new hire. |
| **Conduct a workplace needs assessment** | ✓ Ask the new hire what would support their success.<br>✓ Allow for flexibility in working locations or times.<br>✓ Normalize success enablers by offering them to all team members.<br>✓ Find out what kinds of assistive technology may benefit the new hire (e.g., timers, reading pens, organization software) and allow or provide them.<br>✓ Offer noise-canceling headphones for all team members.<br>✓ Provide access to printed and digital materials.<br>✓ Consider recording or using online transcription tools for long meetings so all employees can refer to them later.<br>✓ Provide shared calendars/planners or other organizational software to visually highlight tasks and deadlines and clarify expectations regarding their usage.<br>✓ Allow for additional time to learn new responsibilities.<br>✓ Allow for more frequent breaks.<br>✓ Provide picture diagrams of problem-solving strategies. |

## COMMUNICATING YOUR ONBOARDING PLAN

Once the start date is determined, Neurodiversity@Work initiative staff should communicate relevant onboarding plan details to key personnel in order to provide the necessary accommodations and logistical support, without disclosing the person's neurodivergence. Communicate the plan to:

✓ Hiring manager

✓ Team members

✓ Job coach

✓ Security

✓ Team/floor/unit administrative assistant

✓ HR manager

"

*Respect the privacy of new hires as you raise awareness of their needs to key personnel within your organization.*

*— private organization initiative lead*

# How can we best support our new hires?

Transitioning to a new workplace may be challenging for neurodivergent hires. In addition to mainstream orientation and onboarding processes, leading Neurodiversity@Work organizations and agencies offer opportunities for a community approach to onboarding and supporting new neurodivergent employees. While a more holistic community approach is available, it is a best practice to give agency to new hires to decide what options will suit their needs.

Upon joining Neurodiversity@Work organizations, each new hire should have a neuroinclusion-trained point of contact who will support their transition into the agency and their team. This point of contact's role is designed to provide work-related information and social support to new hires as they transition into their role and organization. Many established Neurodiversity@Work organizations now use this approach with all new hires, as the onboarding process is more effective and enjoyable for all new hires.

## KEY SUPPORT ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Leading organizations and agencies emphasize the importance of defining the role of each member who can provide support. In some instances, these roles already exist in the organization's mainstream structures. Whether these roles are typical in the organization or specific to the Neurodiversity@Work initiative, communicate your expectations for each role and provide support (e.g., neuroinclusive training and a list of resources) to the members involved. The employee should maintain agency and determine how they engage the various supports that may be available to them based on their preferences and needs.

**Manager**
- ✓ Responsible for onboarding, support, retention, performance, and development
- ✓ Plays a key role in creating a welcoming environment

**Main point of contact**
- ✓ Some organizations have peer mentors as a common practice
- ✓ Is a peer within the new hire's team
- ✓ Helps orient and socialize the new hire to team practices and norms

**Community mentor**
- ✓ A person within the organization but outside the new hire's immediate team
- ✓ A volunteer recruited from ERGs or the organization at large
- ✓ Meets with the new hire regularly, as per the mentee's preference, for at least the first 90 days and provides mentorship beyond the team context
- ✓ Introduces new hires to the organization's culture, norms, resources, etc.
- ✓ A source of social support and access to ERGs, activities, and development programs available at the organization

**Job coach**
- ✓ Provided mostly by external neuroinclusion partners (a few organizations have external job coaches)
- ✓ Highly engaged with managers and the new hire to facilitate effective onboarding
- ✓ Works with the new hire on work practices, time management, prioritization, collaboration and communication
- ✓ Coaches new hires on financial responsibilities and other aspects of the transition in their personal life

**Career coach**
- ✓ Consistent with some organizations' mainstream processes
- ✓ Is senior to the employee and outside their direct reporting line
- ✓ Provides mentoring regarding career advancement within the firm

## HOW INVOLVED DOES NEURODIVERSITY@WORK STAFF REMAIN WITH THE NEURODIVERGENT EMPLOYEE OVER TIME?

At leading firms, Neurodiversity@Work program personnel continue to support the employee, although their involvement changes as the program and relationships mature.

Initially, the Neurodiversity@Work staff have more frequent meetings and involvement with managers and the team's point of contact. As programs mature, involvement of the staff changes from support to focus on continuous improvement, sustainability, growth, and new development initiatives for managers and employees.

### A NOTE ON PRIVACY AND DISCLOSURE

Disclosure of an employee's neurodivergence is their decision and theirs alone. It is your organization's responsibility to create a neuroinclusive culture that cultivates an attitude of curiosity and acceptance of differences in behaviors and needs. Do not ask or pressure neurodivergent employees or new hires to disclose their identities to their colleagues. This is both illegal and counter to neuroinclusion. The ADA prohibits employers from disclosing disability details to others in the organization. Employers may only disclose on a need-to-know basis in the case of a needed accommodation, but only to share the required accommodation and not the diagnosis. Focus and enable managers and team members to ask about preferences related to work and communication practices rather than diagnoses.

## ALTERNATIVE MENTORSHIP METHODS

Agencies and organizations use various mentoring methods and practices. A best practice is to make mentoring optional and mentee-driven. Mentees should be encouraged to identify the mentor who would align with their needs and values and utilize that mentor when needed. Care and training must take place in preparing mentors and mentees to engage effectively in mentoring. Below are a few models for mentoring:

✓ Formal one-on-one peer mentoring and prede termined pairing

✓ Group mentoring

✓ Mentoring circles

✓ Mentorship platform to provide choices in making connections instead of facilitating formal mentorship pairings

✓ A curated list of external mentorship programs for continued professional development, such as the Neurodiversity Network mentoring program

For detailed information about mentoring options and best practices, refer to AskEARN's Workplace Mentoring Playbook and the Neurodiversity Hub's Mentoring Resources.

## LESSONS LEARNED: HOW CAN WE BEST SUPPORT NEW HIRES?

- Continue to be proactive regarding accommodations beyond the first 90 days. The employee's needs may shift after they have a job coach or once they've settled in. Needs may change over time.
- Establish built-in support such as a neuroinclusion-trained support member to ease new hires' transition.
- It is key to help new hires understand what resources are available to them and how to navigate existing support structures within the organization. Explicitly define the role of each member of the team.
- Establish clear feedback channels for managers, team members, and the new hire.
- Respect the employee's privacy. Communicate needs, not identity.
- Suggest to new hires that they create (with assistance from their coach) a white paper of their preferences and styles that may be provided to their manager and anyone they will be working with, if the employee chooses.
- Create a safety net for the new hire, with options for including the job coach or other external resources.
- Expect and respect individual differences. Accommodations and support should be driven by the employee. There is no "one size fits all."
- Have "baseline accommodations" in place before the employee arrives. If accommodations were requested prior to their entry, ensure all are met.
- Make sure their desk, computer, and software systems including email are set up and ready for their arrival.

*Note: Lessons learned are in the words of initiative staff, adjusted for more current practices.*

# Table 9.1: Who is involved in onboarding?

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

| EXTERNAL NEUROINCLUSION PARTNERS |
| --- |
| • Conduct training for the hiring team on neurodiversity in the workplace and neurodivergence culture.<br><br>• If required, provide a job coach who collaborates with the new hire's manager to explain the role they play and discuss expectations regarding communication.<br><br>• Meet with the new hire regularly and assist them in all aspects of the job transition. Specifics vary depending on the new hire's needs and wants. |

## INTERNAL RESOURCES

| NEURODIVERSITY @WORK STAFF | MANAGER | TEAM POINT OF CONTACT | MENTOR | HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGER/ PERSONNEL |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| • Coordinates onboarding.<br><br>• Determines onboarding plan with the manager.<br><br>• Identifies a job coach, where required.<br><br>• Coordinates training with the new hire's manager and team.<br><br>• Plans ongoing programming for support and development of initiative hires and the organization at large.<br><br>• Provides support for managers and teams as needed. | In addition to typical manager responsibilities, Neurodiversity@Work managers:<br><br>• Identify the correct point of contact on the team to help with the employee's transition.<br><br>• Determine the onboarding plan with Neurodiversity@ Work personnel.<br><br>• Collaborate with the job coach.<br><br>• Collaborate with the HR manager and relevant personnel regarding onboarding activities. | • Supports the employee during their transition into the agency.<br><br>• Facilitates the new hire's acclimation to their new team.<br><br>• Collaborates with the job coach and manager if needed. | • Assists in the new hire's acclimation to organizational culture.<br><br>• Introduces the new hire to organizational resources and activities.<br><br>• Meets regularly with the new hire during their transition into the agency. | • Provides explicit communication and support regarding necessary paperwork, benefits, resources, and accommodations.<br><br>• Explains who the employee should contact if there are questions relating to using agency benefits and resources software. |

# Retention & Career Development

Neurodiversity@Work initiatives are growing in number and scope, but are still relatively new. There is much to learn regarding retention and career development for neurodivergent employees and the organization/agency as a whole. As neuroinclusion is prioritized across private and public organizations and neurodivergent employees engage with less masking in their organizations, we learn more about their needs and what is needed to build the capacity of organizations overall. Neuroinclusive organizations understand that navigating organizational structures, networks, or resources to identify and secure development opportunities may be especially challenging for neurodivergent employees and may place a significant burden on their morale and well-being. In this section, we focus on some of the basics of creating effective retention and career development processes. We will address the following *three questions* related to Neurodiversity@Work retention and career development processes:

▶ **How do we inform performance and retention practices to be more neuroinclusive?**
- What kinds of retention activities should we design for neurodivergent employees?
- How do these retention activities align with mainstream retention functions?

▶ **How do we support neurodivergent employees' development and advancement?**
- How can we be thoughtful and supportive of neurodivergent employees?
- How do we respect employees' privacy when they change teams or get a new manager?
- What specific career development resources should we provide?

▶ **How do we support our employees to manage change?**
- What happens when moves or reorganizations happen?
- What happens when a team has a new manager or when an individual changes teams?
- What do we do when an employee wants to change teams?

## RETENTION AND CAREER ADVANCEMENT CHECKLIST

✓ Reframe the context of development and advancement to be neuroinclusive and not biased in normative ways.

✓ Identify and address biased criteria and structures for advancement.

✓ Make resources related to advancement explicit and discoverable in mainstream processes.

✓ Make development and advancement key responsibilities of the manager.

✓ Build the capacity of human resources, human capital, and managers for neuroinclusive development and advancement.

## 1 How do we inform performance and retention practices to be more neuroinclusive?

Neurodiversity@Work leading organizations and agencies use standard performance review metrics and processes for retention. Neurodiversity@Work employees are expected to perform to the organization's standards. Leading organizations emphasize the talent and capabilities demonstrated by members of their programs and the value they add to their teams. When members are onboarded successfully (see Chapter 9) and teams and managers are trained to collaborate effectively, neurodivergent employees generally thrive and achieve. Creating a neuroinclusive culture within your organization is essential to retention. Refer to the Neurodiversity@Work Playbook Employee Engagement and Growth Series Issue #1: Cultivating Neuroinclusive Culture.

Neurodiversity@Work leading organizations and agencies provide continued support for initiative participants through ERGs and other activities, such as professional development opportunities and regular lunches to enhance their experience and engagement in the organization. Neurodiversity@Work staff may collaborate with managers and employees facing challenges if the employee or manager reaches out to them. As the employee's needs change, their accommodations and need for additional coaching may also change. Otherwise, Neurodiversity@Work hires participate in mainstream performance review and retention activities and adhere to the same performance standards as everyone else in the organization.

"

*Retention rates of Neurodiversity@Work employees meet or exceed firm-wide retention rates.*

— *private initiative lead*

## RETENTION SUPPORT CHECKLIST

☐ **Change accommodations as needed**

☐ **Seek support from ERGs and other DEI groups**

☐ **Provide or advise additional coaching if needed**

☐ **Provide continuous training and support for managers and teams**

☐ **Provide regular engagement opportunities for neurodivergent employees**

☐ **Support career exploration and advancement opportunities**

## KEY STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE RETENTION

Nothing about us without us! Engagement and empowerment are key dimensions to improving retention of all employees, particularly those from historically marginalized populations. Leading organizations partner with their neurodivergent employees to develop support structures and a neuroinclusive culture. They do so in five key ways:

🔑 Eliciting feedback and direction from neurodivergent employees regarding matters such as person-first language, activities, policies, and visuals for presentations. Some organizations created a Neurodiversity Advisory Council to provide this feedback systematically.

🔑 Partnering with existing neurodivergent employees and Neurodiversity@ Work program hires in recruiting and training activities.

🔑 Creating a neurodiversity-specific ERG (being mindful of privacy).

🔑 Making development and support activities voluntary to respect the diversity of employees' interests and needs.

🔑 Hiring neurodivergent employees in the Neurodiversity@Work staff ranks.

# 2  How do we support neurodivergent employees' development and advancement?

Leading Neurodiversity@Work organizations leverage their existing development resources and advancement structures. In some cases, Neurodiversity@Work initiatives must address barriers in existing structures that prohibit the equitable advancement of neurodivergent employees. Leading agencies and organizations have also curated and provided additional structures and development activities to support neurodivergent employees. Leading Neurodiversity@Work initiatives are intentional about identifying the variety of needs that emerge as the initiative matures and its scope grows. They are creative in developing or sourcing opportunities for the growth and development of their employees. Most critical to the success of neuroinclusion is the preparation and accountability of managers to support and drive career advancement for all employees, including neurodivergent employees.

Below are a few ways leading organizations support career development. Note that some of the principles below are best contextualized within your agency structures and culture. Your agency should also leverage various robust resources already available within the Federal government (e.g., ODEP, EAP). Refer to the Neurodiversity@Work Playbook Employee Engagement and Growth Series Issue #4: Neuroinclusive Career Advancement for more details on the best practices below.

## STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT CAREER ADVANCEMENT

- ☑ Rethink traditional definitions of advancement and reframe advancement from a neurodivergent lens.
- ☑ Assess existing advancement processes and criteria to identify and address barriers.
- ☑ Provide a broad set of tools and activities to support individual and team growth.
- ☑ Personalize the discovery and development of skills and potential for all employees in neuroinclusive ways.
- ☑ Normalize the support for career advancement as key to the manager's role.
- ☑ Be transparent about the opportunities available.
- ☑ Leverage neurodiversity program leads and regular events to promote holistic advancement.

## ON PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

While neurodivergent people have long been key contributors to their organizations when employed, they have not always felt safe to be their authentic selves at work. Neurodivergent employees have often had to assimilate into their environment, taking on negative health and cognitive impacts. Because of this, there is an increased need to create psychologically safe workplaces inclusive of the unique talents, needs, experiences, perspectives, and different ways of being of neurodivergent people.

In a psychologically safe and neuroinclusive environment, there is understanding and appreciation for different needs and ways of being, which creates a community where both neurotypical and neurodivergent team members can thrive and grow in their careers. Refer to the Neurodiversity@Work Playbook Employee Engagement and Growth Series Issue #5: Creating Psychological Safety in the Workplace to learn more about creating psychological safety in organizations and teams.

# 3 How do we support employees to manage change?

While organizational change such as layoffs, reorganization of divisions, manager change, lateral movement, and office moves can be challenging for all employees, the impact of change may be exacerbated for neurodivergent employees. Neurodivergent people, due to differences in sensory sensitivities, social interaction, information processing needs, cognitive load needs, and their experiences with discrimination and trauma as a result of these differences, are impacted disproportionately in response to change. There are several reasons for this:

- For many neurodivergent employees who struggle to find and maintain employment, the threat of layoffs will create high levels of insecurity.
- For neurodivergent employees who may value consistency and clarity, the possibility of disruption will create high levels of anxiety and distractions from the work.
- For some neurodivergent employees who find it challenging to decode subtle messages around change, the experience may be alienating and counterproductive to the inclusion work already done.
- Neurodivergent employees often experience concurrent conditions such as anxiety and depression. Uncertainty and the threat of losing employment have a substantially higher negative impact.

## PRIVACY FIRST

The employee's privacy preferences should always be a priority when changes occur. In some instances, employees may want all members of their new team to be informed and receive training, or they may only want their manager to be informed. Legally, you may only inform the manager on a need-to-know basis about needed accommodations, but never about neurodivergence.

## ANTICIPATE EMPLOYEES' NEEDS

Leading Neurodiversity@Work agencies and organizations emphasize the importance of being attentive to change and proactively anticipating and supporting neurodivergent employee needs. They also encourage initiative staff to consider the following questions:

- What happens when moves or reorganizations happen?
- What happens when a team has a new manager?
- What do we do when an employee wants to change teams?

# 3.1. What happens when moves or reorganizations occur?

No matter how contained or widespread the scale of change may be, leaders at every level of the organization must be intentional in their approach to communicating and executing the change. When considering the potential impact of change, leaders and managers must keep in mind that different employees, especially neurodivergent employees, may react to change differently based on their life experiences. Below are key practices to minimize the negative impact of change contextualized for neurodivergent employees specifically. Note that these practices apply to all employees.

✓ Be clear and explain why the change is necessary.

✓ Develop a holistic communication plan.

✓ Prepare and staff up neurodiversity hiring, HR, and accommodation teams to ensure that they have the capacity and capability to support employees.

✓ Prepare managers to lead their teams through change.

Refer to the Neurodiversity@Work Playbook Employee Engagement and Growth Series Issue #2: Neuroinclusive Organizational Change Management to learn more about managing and facilitating change.

## CLEAR COMMUNICATION IS KEY

Provide open communication channels between employees and their managers as well as executives to reinforce:

✓ The need for change.

✓ Ways employees will be supported during change.

✓ Next steps the organization is taking to implement change.

✓ Support available from Neurodiversity@Work initiative staff.

## MANAGING ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE CHECKLIST

☑ Be transparent about change.

☑ Make expectations clear — what you expect as well as what the employee should expect.

☑ Address change (whether anticipated or not) swiftly by meeting with those impacted.

☑ Empower managers as well as HR, accommodation, and neurodiversity hiring teams to lead change consistently and empathetically.

☑ Respond to employee concerns empathetically.

☑ Create a clear communication plan, leveraging multiple channels and using multimedia.

☑ Communicate clearly and often throughout the change process.

☑ Check in with impacted employees regularly throughout the change process and beyond.

# 3.2. What happens when a team has a new manager?

A change in manager may be the most disruptive event to an employee's work life and may induce much uncertainty and anxiety. For neurodivergent employees, an inclusive manager is one of the key success enablers. Manager changes can be caused by an internal or external promotion, a transfer of the manager or employee, or a reorganization of the unit. Regardless of the reasons, that change can be stressful.

For many neurodivergent employees who have struggled to find and maintain employment, the introduction of a new manager who might be unfamiliar with their work and needs will create high levels of insecurity. This insecurity may be exacerbated if they have experienced a lower sense of self due to discrimination they have experienced from past managers. Neurodiversity@Work leading employers stress the need to take special care in how they support their employees during manager transitions.

### TRAUMA-INFORMED CARE

Consider this Trauma-Informed Care framework to support neurodivergent employees during manager transitions:

▶ **Safety:** Ensuring physical and emotional safety

▶ **Choice:** Individual has choice and control

▶ **Collaboration:** Making decisions with the individual & sharing power

▶ **Trustworthiness:** Task, clarity, consistency & interpersonal boundaries

▶ **Empowerment:** Prioritizing empowerment & skill building

Refer to the Neurodiversity@Work Playbook Employee Engagement and Growth Series Issue #3: Neuroinclusive Transition to a New Manager and The Manager's Quick Guide to Manager Change to learn more about this framework.

## SUPPORTING THE TRANSITION TO A NEW MANAGER CHECKLIST

☑ Be transparent about change.

☑ Respond to employee concerns empathetically.

☑ Maintain the privacy of the individual regarding their neurodivergence and accommodations.

☑ Follow the employee's lead about their needs and preferences in how they want to manage the transition.

☑ Check in with your employees regularly throughout the change process and beyond.

☑ Be intentional about team alignment and normalize such activities for all team changes.

☑ Educate new managers on neurodiversity and accommodation processes in the mainstream manager onboarding process, regardless of their team composition.

# 3.3. What do we do when an employee wants to change teams?

When a Neurodiversity@Work program hire wants to change teams, they must follow the agency's standard procedures and work with Neurodiversity@Work staff and other internal partners (e.g., HR, accommodations) to manage the process. Neurodiversity@Work initiative staff can facilitate this process by making the process more explicit and providing opportunities for development.

Changing teams is often dependent on:

- The employee's current role and skill set.
- The organizational structure in relation to the employee's current and desired team.
- The organization's policies regarding mobility across teams and divisions.
- The job and security requirements related to the desired role.

> "
> *Be proactive — have managers involve the Neurodiversity@Work team when they know a change is likely to occur.*

Leading agencies and organizations also noted that clear conversations with employees that set expectations about possible pathways to promotion and about how career development structures within the organization work are critical to managing their expectations. The goal is to take a strength-based approach to career advancement that emphasizes a growth mindset while also recognizing agency requirements.

## WAYS TO FACILITATE ROLE CHANGES

Leading Neurodiversity@Work agencies and private organizations may facilitate team and role changes in the following ways if, and only if, the employee requests support:

- ☑ Assisting the employee in understanding the job requirements related to their skills.
- ☑ Providing an aptitude test to establish the employee's skill set and aptitude to learn the new position's required skills.
- ☑ Managers and initiative staff may work with the employee on a plan to acquire the needed skills while working in their current role.
- ☑ Providing job shadowing and fellowship experiences to explore new roles within the organization.
- ☑ Mentoring programs within the organizations are also crucial resources for employees considering changes in their roles and careers.
- ☑ Defining organizational processes and approvals required to make the transition possible.

## LESSONS LEARNED: HOW CAN WE BEST MANAGE CHANGE?

- Be deliberate and transparent about change.
- Timeliness is critical when communicating change.
- Set explicit boundaries and expectations of respect and compassion.
- Provide clear, discoverable resources to support transitions.
- Respect individual rights to privacy during transitions.
- Empower neurodivergent employees by providing accessible resources and best practices related to their rights around disclosure and requests for accommodations.
- Identify a point of contact from HR, accommodations, and neurodiversity teams to support transitions.

*Note: Lessons learned are in the words of initiative staff.*

# The Way Forward

We are at a unique moment in talent management history, characterized by a shortage of talent in mission-critical areas, fewer applicants to Federal jobs, aging of the federal workforce, high levels of burnout and mental health challenges, changing expectations of the workforce (especially in younger generations), and residual pandemic impacts. These factors should encourage talent management leaders to reassess whether and how our systems should be more flexible and customizable to attract and empower talent. Now more than ever, we need a human-centered approach to talent management that leverages strengths and provides supportive, customizable work environments and practices. Many of the challenges faced by talent management professionals are consistent with those faced by Neurodiversity@Work professionals, and they may be addressed using neuroinclusion principles. Neurodiversity@Work initiatives are a great pathway to transform work environments and address the many HR trends noted above.

Neurodiversity@Work initiatives, however, remain relatively new, especially in the Federal workplace. Leading agencies continue to grow, evolve, and examine new possibilities. As existing Neurodiversity@Work initiatives across private organizations and Federal agencies grow and mature, new opportunities, questions, and challenges will arise. Leading organizations and agencies grapple with questions regarding the growth, sustainability, and development of employees in a changing employment and economic landscape.

Below are some of the *key questions* to consider once you launch your initiative. Many of these questions continue to evolve. This is a dynamic and ever-changing environment that requires continuous learning, innovation, and adaptation for new and current Neurodiversity@Work agencies and organizations.

## 1. IMPACT

- What is the long-term impact of our initiative on our community? How do we measure that impact holistically?
- What is the impact on our organization (KPI)? How do we best measure KPI in the long term?
- What kind of impact does this program have on our stakeholders?

- How do we scale up and scale down our initiative activities?
- How and when do we integrate best practices into mainstream processes?

## 3. RECRUITMENT

- How do we identify and use alternative mediums (e.g., social media, networks) to increase the diversity of our candidate pool (e.g., ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status)?
- How do we increase the participation of managers in neurodiversity hiring programs?

## 4. PREPARING INDIVIDUALS

- How do we partner with other ecosystem partners to better prepare neurodivergent individuals for the workplace?
- How do we support neurodivergent individuals' self-determination and advocacy?

## 5. PREPARING THE WORKPLACE

- What makes a good manager?
- How do we prepare managers?
- How do we continue to develop our managers to be exemplary inclusive leaders?
- What makes a good team?
- How do we prepare teams?
- What is the impact of training on the organization overall? How do we measure that?

- How do we address mental health issues in the workplace?
- How can internal resources (e.g., EAPs, ERGs) and external resources (e.g., community service providers, families, job coaches) be adapted and used to support neurodivergent employees?
- What are effective training techniques to improve the knowledge, attitudes, and knowhow of co-workers and managers?

## 7. ADVANCEMENT & CAREER DEVELOPMENT

- How do we support how neurodivergent individuals measure and talk about their own success?
- How do we coach neurodivergent individuals to navigate the career advancement process?
- How do we better identify and address barriers and key facilitators to advancement for neurodivergent individuals?

## 8. NEURODIVERSITY@WORK PROGRAM DESIGN REFINEMENTS

- What functions and activities make sense to outsource permanently?
- Is it more feasible to offload the training permanently? Is it financially reasonable to have an internal trainer spend the amount of time it will take to work internally for the program?
- What are creative/non-traditional ways to facilitate the success of neurodivergent individuals (e.g., free food, transportation, on-premises health care)?
- How do we create a new process to facilitate a productive separation?
- How can we provide a consistent level of job coaching when needed?

# Appendix A

The expertise needed to design and launch a successful neuroinclusion initiative may already be available either within your organization or from external agencies and vendors in your community. Therefore, it is important to tap into existing resources and build a coalition of internal and external partners who can provide the necessary expertise and resources. Appendix A describes in more detail the specific role each internal and external coalition member plays in initiating an Neurodiversity@Work initiative.

## Resources and the role they can play in planning

| INTERNAL RESOURCES |
| --- |

| Agency Level | |
| --- | --- |
| **Executive sponsors** | • Champion the initiative internally<br>• Inform alignment with strategy and values that enhance the sustainability of the initiative<br>• Provide visibility for the effort and further alignment across agency units and needed functions<br>• Provide meaningful support leading to commitment of resources needing that buy-in<br>• Provide risk mitigation and political cover<br>• Provide resources<br>• Promote the initiative internally and externally through regular, explicit communication |
| **Department leaders and hiring managers** | • Identify and secure possible positions/headcount for relevant roles across the agency<br>• Cultivate a culture of inclusion<br>• Share successes and promote the initiative internally<br>• Advise on initiative design and implementation<br>• Provide feedback for continuous improvement and innovations for initiative goals and activities |
| **Human resources** | • Inform initiative design and execution<br>• Support initiative activities<br>• Support the initiative and candidates throughout the employee lifecycle, through recruitment, selection, hiring, onboarding, retention, advancement, and termination |
| **Talent acquisition/ recruitment team** | • Identify and secure possible positions/headcount for relevant roles across the agency<br>• Recruit candidates<br>• Support the interview and selection process<br>• Partner in transforming recruitment processes<br>• Identify neurodivergent talent sources |

## INTERNAL RESOURCES

| Agency Level | |
|---|---|
| **Employee resource groups (ERGs)** | • Support new hires and raise awareness of team members<br>• Inform initiative design and provide support<br>• Broader ERGs provide existing and new hires with community for social support and pursuit of interests |
| **Procurement** | • Advise on vendor selection processes and procedures<br>• Establish contracts to support the initiative<br>• Assist in identifying agency- and Federal-level vendors and services |
| **Employee engagement strategy lead/human development/ employee experience** | • Develop initiative feedback strategies<br>• Assist with engaging peer support<br>• Advise on program design and supports |
| **Talent acquisition/ recruitment team** | • Identify and secure possible positions/headcount for relevant roles across the agency<br>• Recruit candidates<br>• Support the interview and selection process<br>• Partner in transforming recruitment processes<br>• Identify neurodivergent talent sources |
| **Equal Employment Opportunity Director** | • Ensure agency compliance with Federal disability regulations<br>• Inform initiative design and execution |
| **Agency-level employee referral groups** | • Connect employees to disability resources<br>• Connect employees with communities of interest |
| **Agency-level wellness initiatives** | • Connect employees with needed resources<br>• Advise on design of work and employee supports for well-being |
| **Chief Learning Officer** | • Sponsor development of learning materials<br>• Prioritize neuroinclusion training within agency framework<br>• Share successes and best practices with other agencies |
| **General council/legal** | • Provide clarity on law and policy<br>• Ensure communication is aligned with policy and the tone of the agency<br>• Advise initiative leadership regarding compliance and legal issues |
| **Selective Placement initiative Coordinators (SPPC)** | • Assist with recruiting and hiring<br>• Advise on initiative implementation<br>• Assist with devising accommodation plans |
| **Federal contractors with neurodiversity hiring experience** | • Share best practices and successes<br>• Provide connections to resources in the community |

## INTERNAL RESOURCES
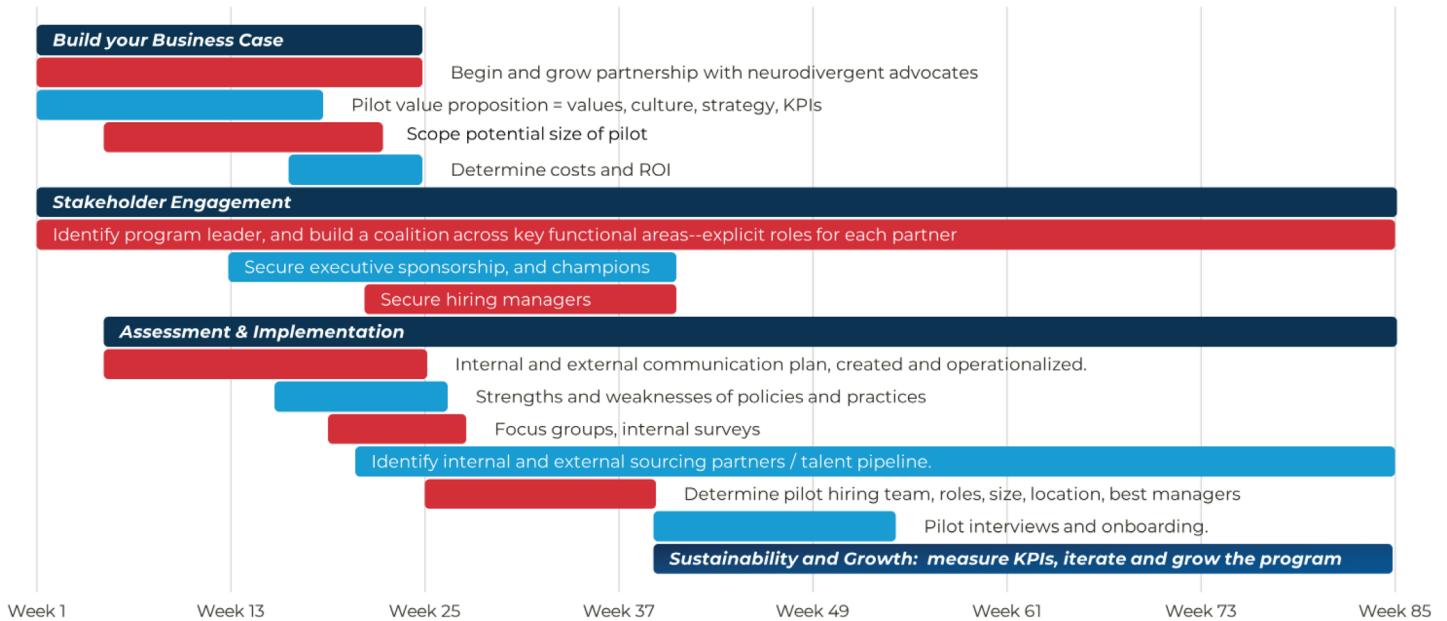
### Federal Level

| | |
|---|---|
| **U.S. Department of Labor - Job Accommodation Network** | • Provide guidance on accommodation strategies |
| **U.S. Department of Health and Human Services - Employee Assistance initiative** | • Provide training and resource support for employees and managers |
| **Social Security Administration - Ticket to Work** | • Identify qualified candidates and community partners |
| **U.S. AbilityOne Commission** | • Employ disabled persons by providing goods and services to the Federal government<br>• Make community connections |
| **U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission** | • Provides disability related publications to employers<br>• Supplies guidance for complying with disability employment laws |
| **DEIA** | • Provides strategies for supporting employees<br>• Establishes standards of success |

## EXTERNAL RESOURCES

| | |
|---|---|
| **Neurodiversity@Work Employer Roundtable** | • Share Neurodiversity@Work best practices and lessons learned<br>• Provide a space to exchange best practices and learn together to leverage opportunities and address challenges<br>• Provide access to resources and potential providers |
| **Local agencies and providers** | • Inform initiative design<br>• Provide job coaches to support candidates and managers<br>• Inform initial initiative design and execution<br>• Source candidates<br>• Provide training for managers and coworkers |
| **Talent sourcing vendors and platforms** | • Identify qualified candidates<br>• Prepare candidates with work readiness skills |
| **Colleges and universities** | • Identify qualified candidates<br>• Advise organizations regarding initiative design and execution<br>• Prepare candidates with work readiness skills |

# Appendix B

## Illustration of a project plan timeline

**Build your Business Case**

Begin and grow partnership with neurodivergent advocates

Pilot value proposition = values, culture, strategy, KPIs

Scope potential size of pilot

Determine costs and ROI

**Stakeholder Engagement**

Identify program leader, and build a coalition across key functional areas--explicit roles for each partner

Secure executive sponsorship, and champions

Secure hiring managers

**Assessment & Implementation**

Internal and external communication plan, created and operationalized.

Strengths and weaknesses of policies and practices

Focus groups, internal surveys

Identify internal and external sourcing partners / talent pipeline.

Determine pilot hiring team, roles, size, location, best managers

Pilot interviews and onboarding.

**Sustainability and Growth: measure KPIs, iterate and grow the program**

Week 1   Week 13   Week 25   Week 37   Week 49   Week 61   Week 73   Week 85

# Leading firms' Neurodiversity@Work planning phase

| | Microsoft | SAP | EY | Chase | Federal agency |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Initiated by** | • Executive: Worldwide Operations Corporate VP and Chief Accessibility Officer | • Bottom-up: Individuals on the business side started a pilot, then the Chief Diversity Officer and a managing director advocated for the program to expand | • Executive: Head of Diversity & Inclusion and firm's accessibilities leader | • Executive: Senior leaders, including Global CIO | • Bottom-up: Cyber workforce program manager |
| **Program led by** | • Director-level champion<br>• Dedicated FTE, grown to dedicated FTE team | • Business unit director-level champion<br>• Dedicated FTE, grown to dedicated FTE team | • Associate director (no FTE at first), grown to dedicated FTE team | • Executive director of mortgage banking quality assurance – dedicated FTE, grown to dedicated FTE team | • Chief of Office of Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Accessibility |
| **Catalysts** | • Focus on accessibility as core organizational value<br>• Strategic value of untapped technical talent<br>• Focus on making greater social impact for those with autism | • Pilot program success<br>• Leadership announced initiative as a global aspirational intention<br>• Value of untapped talent<br>• Potential for process quality improvement | • Opportunity to create more diversity and inclusion across the firm<br>• Quickly became a business imperative to recruit talent to meet demand | • Pilot program success<br>• Executive who had previous experience working with neurodiverse employees<br>• Meeting talent demand | • Difficulty filling cyber roles<br>• Desire to be a more inclusive workplace |
| **Timeline from idea to pilot launch** | • Idea in January 2015; launch in May 2015 | • Pilot in India in 2013. Announced March 2013; launched in May 2013 | • Idea in 2015; launch in 2016 | • Idea in 2013; launch in 2015-16 | • Idea in 2019; launch in 2023 |