

TOP 10

Ten questions every board director needs to ask about neurodiversity

Board members play a significant role in creating a truly inclusive organisation. If you are serious about supporting neurodivergent employees and attracting neurodivergent board members, start by addressing the structures and frameworks that limit inclusion, and then move on to creating and executing your inclusivity strategies.

1. What is neurodiversity?

The term “neurodiversity” was coined in the late 1990s by autistic Australian sociologist Judy Singer, who offered the view that brain differences are natural, rather than deficits. Just as we need and appreciate biodiversity, she advocated for celebrating the variations found in the human brain.



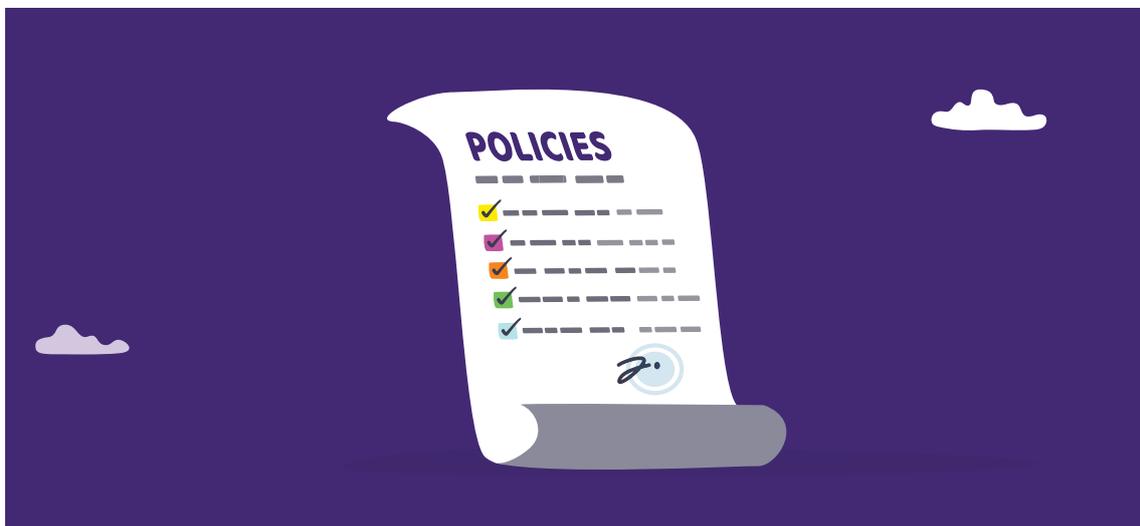
2. What does “neurodivergent” mean and how are people affected?

A neurodivergent person is one whose brain varies from the “typical” brain, or the brain of someone who is “neurotypical”. Neurodivergence takes in autism, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, dyspraxia, Tourette syndrome and more. Every neurodivergent person is affected differently.

- **Autism** is a neurodevelopmental variation that influences the brain’s structure and function. This affects how an autistic person interacts with others, thinks, feels, and experiences the environment around them. Every autistic person is affected differently from every other, and this is why autism is described as a spectrum (“autism spectrum”).
- **Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)** is a neurodevelopmental variation characterised by increased levels of inattention, impulsivity and hyperactivity. People with ADHD have lower levels of executive function than those who are neurotypical, which makes it more challenging to plan, organise, initiate, remember and self-regulate.
- **Dyslexia** is a neurological difference that affects how people process information. It can affect education, work and daily life.
- **Dyspraxia**, also known as developmental coordination disorder (DCD), is a neurological difference that affects how the brain processes actions. It usually affects coordination and movement and remains one of the lesser understood neurodivergent conditions.
- **Tourette syndrome** is a neurodevelopmental variation that affects the brain and the nerves. It is characterised by sudden involuntary movements and sounds called tics.

3. Do our policies and procedures support neurodivergent people who wish to contribute to the board and the organisation?

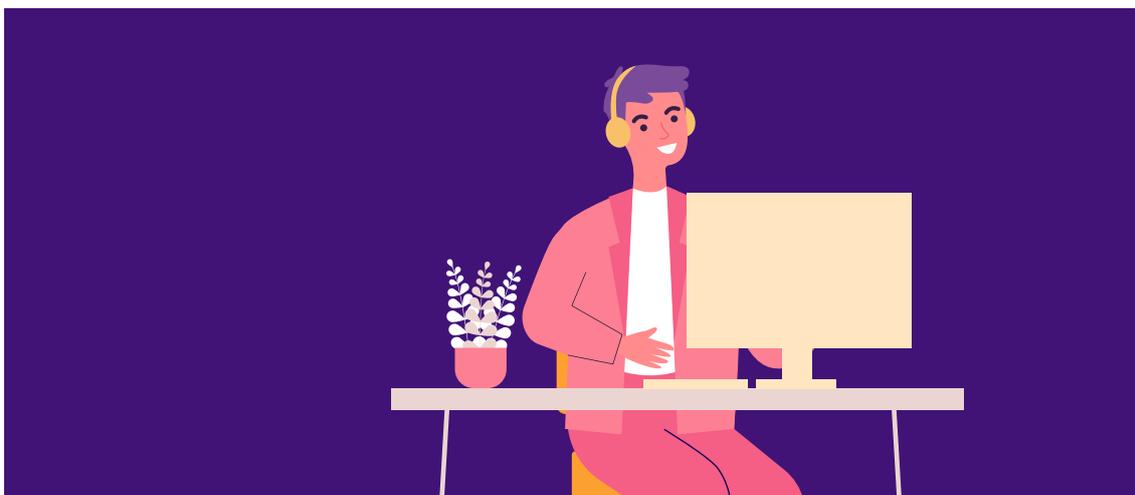
Review your policies and procedures to ensure they explicitly support neurodivergent people. These may include your policies and procedures on recruitment, hybrid work, leave, performance management and bullying. Encourage all managers and board members to familiarise themselves with the Fair Work Act and workplace adjustment arrangements, and to be open with new and existing employees about your commitment to these arrangements.



4. What is a workplace adjustment arrangement? How does this differ from a flexible work arrangement?

Workplace adjustments provide neurodivergent people or disability the opportunity to perform to the best of their ability and to be as effective as possible in their role. They are protected by law under the Fair Work Act. Adjustments include the provision of IT equipment and software, stationery, adjustable lighting, noise-cancelling headphones, equipment or modifications for physical accessibility, changes to instructions, written resources and flexible work schedules.

Flexible work arrangements are also protected by law under the Fair Work Act. Most employees in Australia can request them after 12 months with the same employer. They refer to flexibility in terms of work hours, work patterns or the location of work.



5. Does the composition of our board reflect the community we serve?

Given that one in five people are neurodivergent, does your board truly reflect the community you serve? Check by asking questions like these: Do you have people from diverse cultures and backgrounds? A range of age groups? Diverse gender identities? People with disability or neurodivergence? If you were to recruit more diverse board members, what measures would you need to put in place to accommodate and support their needs?

6. Is diversity – including neurodiversity – a governance issue for our board?

Understanding the importance of including different perspectives across your entire organisation helps you stay in touch with their broader community and facilitates growth. A board that demonstrates inclusive leadership, benefits the entire organisation. Inclusive leadership is proven to promote innovation and growth and helps your organisation avoid group think and impacts how you make decisions. Organisations with Inclusive leaders are 70% more likely to capture new markets, according to Chief Executive for Corporate Purpose (CECP) and 87% more likely to make better decisions, according to Korn Ferry Research.

7. Are our board meetings conducted in an inclusive way?

Discuss how board meetings and AGMs are conducted and how they could be improved. Do you schedule sufficient breaks? Do you send around papers two weeks ahead? Do you provide virtual meeting options? Could we set aside time before each meeting for newer members to be briefed in person? How about a buddy system or mentoring for newer board members?



8. What can we do to educate our managers about neurodiversity?

Consider offering training to managers on working with neurodivergent people. Training managers can help them to better understand neurodivergent individuals' needs and strengths, reduce stigma and misunderstandings, and create a more inclusive work environment. It is important to ensure that neurodivergent perspectives are included in such training.

9. What kind of training would work for our board?

There is a lot of great diversity training available for boards, both online and in person, including neurodiversity training. Unconscious bias training is recommended for anyone involved in recruitment. Neurodiversity training helps people to understand and accept different communication styles. Discussing different approaches to communication, time management and conflict will help create understanding and synergy on your board and in your workplace.

10. How can we improve our recruitment process?

From advertising to interview to orientation, be clear in your recruitment processes about how you support and empower neurodiverse employees. Here are some suggestions from the [Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training \(ADCET\)](#):

- **Include diversity statements** and information about adjustment requests in your advertisements.
- **Provide interview questions in advance.** Candidates who have neurodivergent conditions may process information differently and need more time to articulate a response that reflects their true skills and capabilities.
- **Create a low-sensory environment for interviews.** Try to avoid strong scents, bright lighting, background noise and visual clutter.
- **Offer flexibility on interview times and delivery mode.** Some candidates, for example, may find it difficult to navigate public transport, particularly during peak hours.
- **Include detailed, step-by-step information in advance of the job application and interview process.** Candidates with neurodivergent conditions are often (not always) visual thinkers, and visual imagery to support text-heavy documents can be helpful. Include the names of the interview panellists, if possible.
- **Use clear, concise, plain English language** and avoid jargon, colloquialisms and acronyms.
- **Don't worry if the candidate's eye contact and body language are not what you're used to.** Some people have hyper- or hyposensitivity or have trouble maintaining eye contact or shaking someone's hand.

