

What you don’t see can hurt you:

The hidden costs of hidden talent

(Designing working environments that unlock neurodivergent talent while strengthening performance and productivity)

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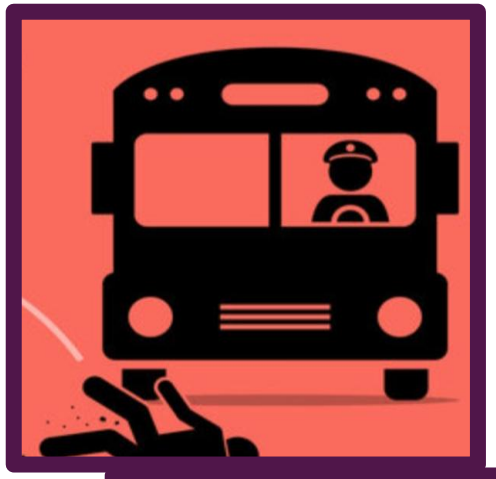
Welcome to this session and our unorthodox ground rules!





Empathise

We speak now; the slides can be studied later!

Be MAD

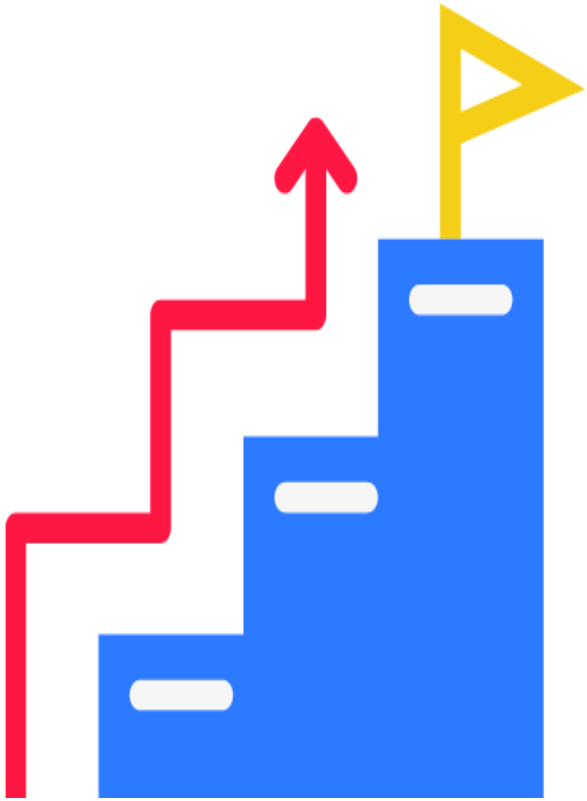
Ask don’t assume

Offence causes a fence



Experience

The Session Objectives

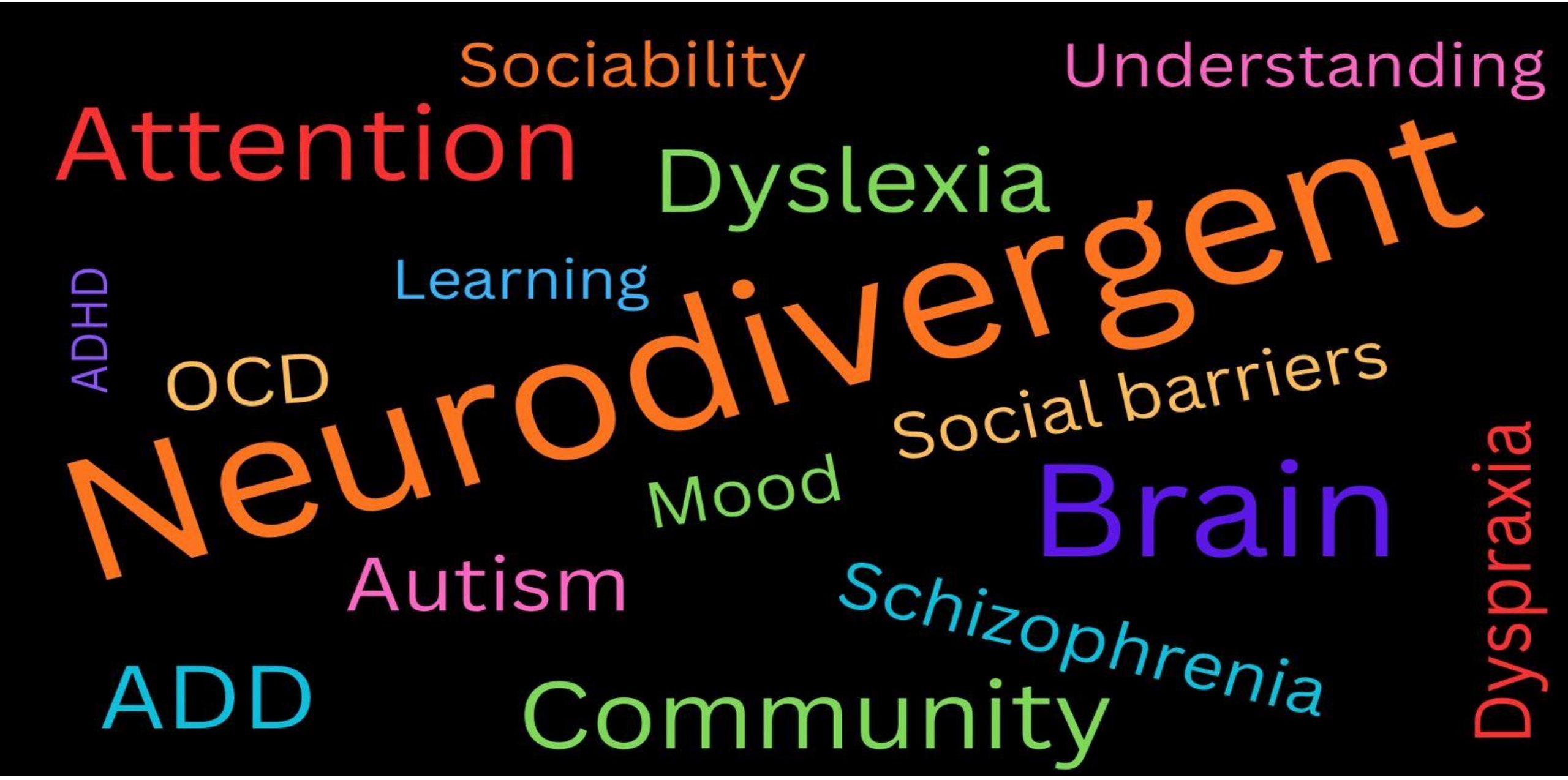


The overarching aim is to promote positive ability-focused conversations and fair performance management that enable organisations to benefit from overlooked **neurodivergent talent**.

- **Removing barriers** in hiring and interviews by focusing on skills over social presentation. Using inclusive methods such as work trials and structured interviews.
- **Introducing simple, low-cost adjustments** (e.g. clear communication, quiet workspaces).
- **Equipping managers and HR to understand the benefits of neurodivergent talent** including unique perceptions, communication and social cues.

Reflection point: Neurodivergent talent isn't rare, **opportunity is.**

What is Neurodivergence?

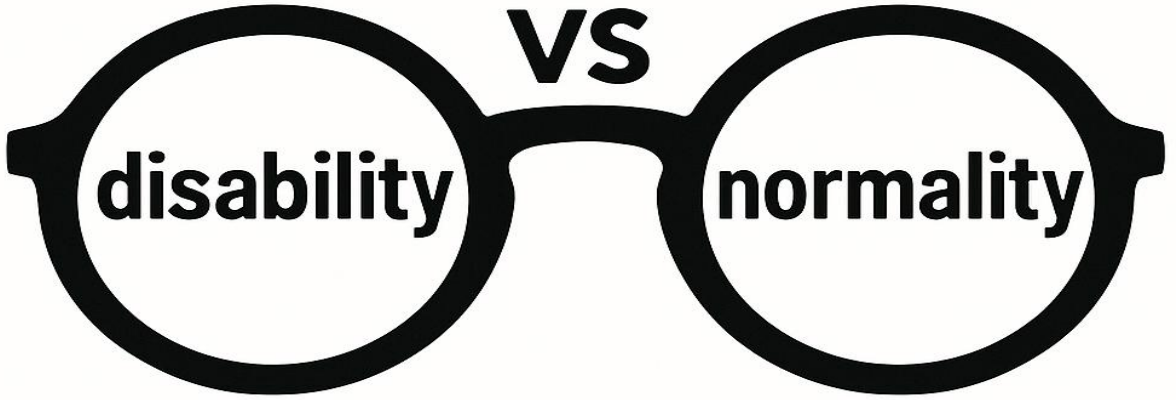


Glasses!


T
Hearing Loop


Accessible
toilet


PUSH
TO OPEN


VS
disability
normality


SHURE



Experiencing barriers and the power of reasonable adjustments

The Purpose of the interactive exercise

Hopefully, the session gave you a real-time experience of:

- The difference a reasonable adjustment can make.
- How normalising difference magnifies our sameness,
- How we might stop seeing accessibility as “special treatment” and start seeing it as a normal part of human variation.
- How colleagues may feel when they cannot participate fully in tasks/events.

How did that feel?



Key words

In an EDI-informed workplace the words mean

Neurodivergent: A person whose brain works differently from what is considered typical.

Talent: The skills, strengths, and potential someone brings to their work.

Inclusive: Making sure everyone feels welcome, respected, and able to take part.

Reflection point: Words are not always as satisfactory as we would like them to be.
Like the neighbours on our street;
- **we must live with them,**
- **we don't always agree with them**
- **and they change!**

Sometimes words tell people's stories. Sometimes they translate into politically correct trouble!

We are focused on neurodivergent talent; What is talent?

If we were to create a foolproof recipe for talent what would the basic ingredients be?

	**Essential** - Aptitude, skills, intelligence
	**Catalyst** - Self-motivation, team player, natural leader
	**Value -adding** - Creative thinking, ideas, results orientated
	**The oven** - Performance (The conditions people work in)
	**The product** - Success



Why this matters to employers and to employees

- 1 in 5 working-age people has a disability.
- Disability is often invisible or acquired during working life.
- Businesses face skills shortages, retention pressures and rising costs.

There are around 9.5 million people of working age with a disability in the UK, and yet only 5.1 million of them are in work. This represents a huge pool of hidden talent which businesses can't afford to ignore, particularly in view of the ageing population and the likelihood that a greater proportion of the workforce will develop a health condition or disability.

Reflection point:
Inclusion is no longer optional…it is strategic.
It's how future-ready organisations survive and grow.

What is hidden talent?

- Skilled, motivated people excluded by assumptions, systems or confidence
- Neurodiversity, mental health, long-term conditions, learning disabilities.
- Talent lost before recruitment, during onboarding or through attrition.

Reflection point: Hidden talent across the UK is lost not through lack of skill, but through assumptions and systems that exclude neurodivergent people before hiring, during onboarding, or through avoidable attrition. This costs businesses capability they can’t afford to miss.



The business benefits of unlocking neurodivergent talent and creating truly inclusive workspaces

Disability Inclusion isn’t charity; it’s a competitive advantage.

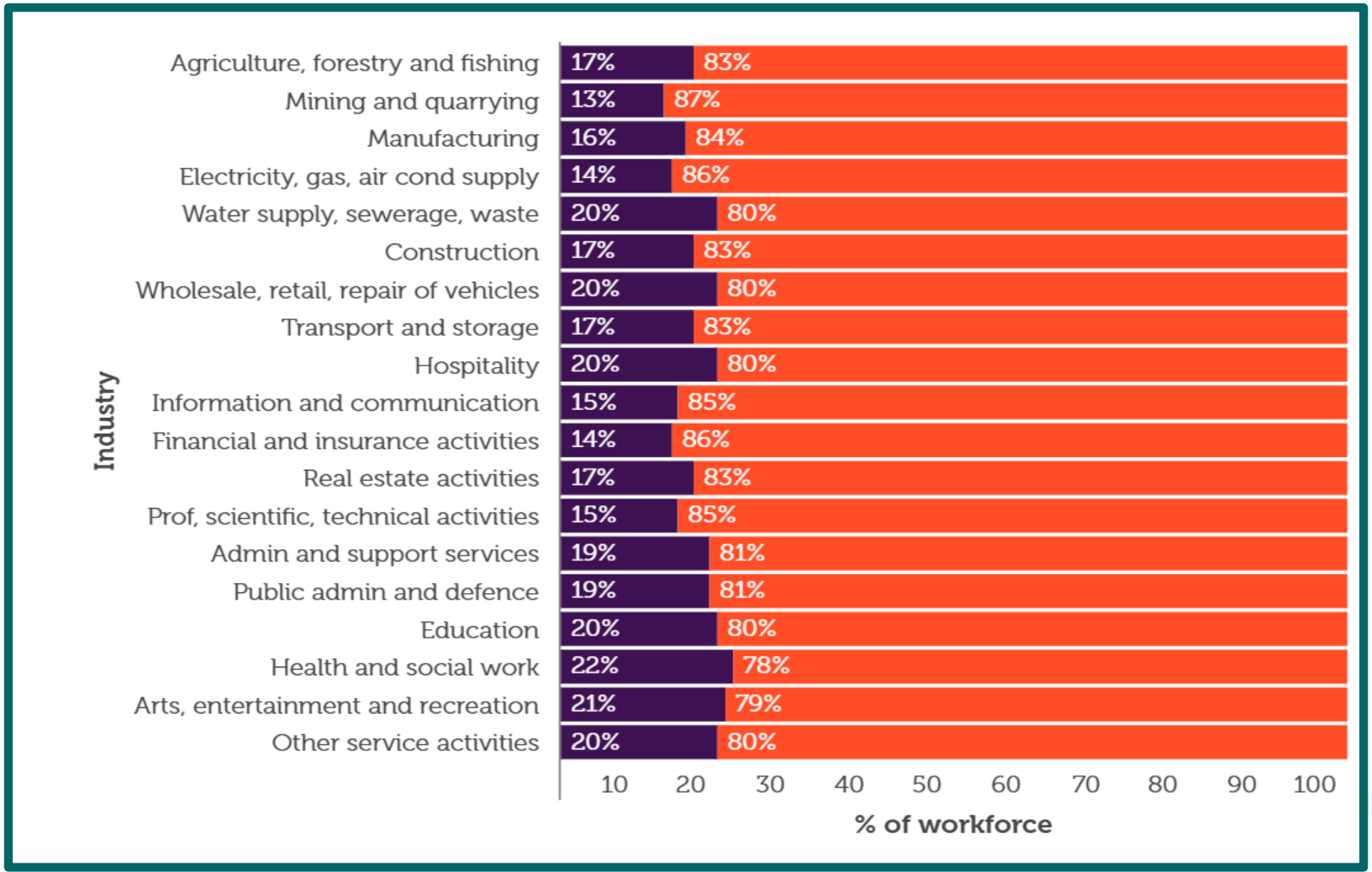
Disability by industry -

Disability exists in every sector; opportunity doesn't.

Equality Act Disabled

Not Equality Act Disabled

Source: UK Annual Population Survey January to December 2024



What's in it for you?

- ✓ **Wider talent pools in a tight labour market**

  - *Stop fishing in the same pond; neurodiverse inclusion unlocks overlooked skills and capability.*

- ✓ **Higher retention and reduced recruitment costs**

  - *Inclusive workplaces keep people longer, cutting churn and rehiring costs.*

- ✓ **Improved productivity and problem-solving**

  - *Different minds think differently, driving smarter solutions and stronger performance.*

- ✓ **Stronger employer brand and customer trust**

  - *Inclusive employers attract talent, win loyalty, and better reflect their customers.*

- ✓ **More engaged, loyal teams**

  - *When people feel valued and supported, commitment and motivation follow.*

Reflection point: Research shows inclusive teams can be **up to 80% more productive.**


BREAKING
NEWS



While we have been in this session the financial systems within the London Borough of Newham have sustained a serious algorithmic error requiring the immediate implementation of a cash-based system.

Group leaders will be appointed and £10,000 cash allocated to each group to provide for the immediate needs of the members of the groups.

Li Zhang, Director of Algorithm Engineering at MCPD China has been brought in to support the process. To prevent the spread of the error the IT systems have been shut down. However, Mr Zhang can join the sessions taking place across the conference via a mobile connection. He will now explain the resilience packages put in place to provide for you until the issue is resolved.

You are all expected to listen to the guidance from Mr Zhang and support your leads to consider the resilience package. However, the lead will take the final decision.


Li Zhang
MCPD Director of Algorithm Engineering
CIPD Interactive exercise recording

Full transcript of encrypted phone call with LI Zhang:

- I have been asked to make this call to inform you of a critical incident.
  While the digital tech teams were working on the Newham financial systems related to a multi-million-pound project a serious algorithmic error has been discovered.
  A decision must be made immediately, or you risk losing £10,000.
- I have carried out an investigation into the incident and can assure you that the issue will be resolved swiftly. In the meantime, the CIPD management have given permission for the implementation of the Resilience package I have developed. You have all been placed into groups. Each group will be given £10,000 to cover your expenses until the matter is resolved.
- Group leader: to signify to the session facilitator that you wish to retain the £10,000 and to agree that you will exercise financial responsibility and fairness with respect to the funds please ensure you or someone in your group places the cash in their right hand and then raises their right hand in the air until the facilitator comes round to confirm your allocation.
- Temi Fawehinmi will now round up this session so that I can resume work on the algorithmic error.

Experiencing exclusion and the power of privilege

The Purpose of the interactive exercise

Hopefully, the session gave you a real-time experience of:

- What exclusion feels like under pressure
- How quickly belonging can be lost when information is inaccessible
- How power dynamics shift when communication barriers exist
- How colleagues may feel when they cannot participate fully in critical decisions

How did that feel?



READ ME!

You have privilege.
Your privilege is the **ability to speak and understand Chinese.**

Li Zhang said that to keep the £10,000 place the cash in the right hand of any member of your group and ask them to raise their right hand in the air until the facilitator comes over to confirm your allocation of funds.



Microsoft, Deloitte and Google removing barriers

Three clear, real-world examples showing how major organisations have removed barriers from recruitment processes by focusing on skills over social presentation and using inclusive hiring methods.

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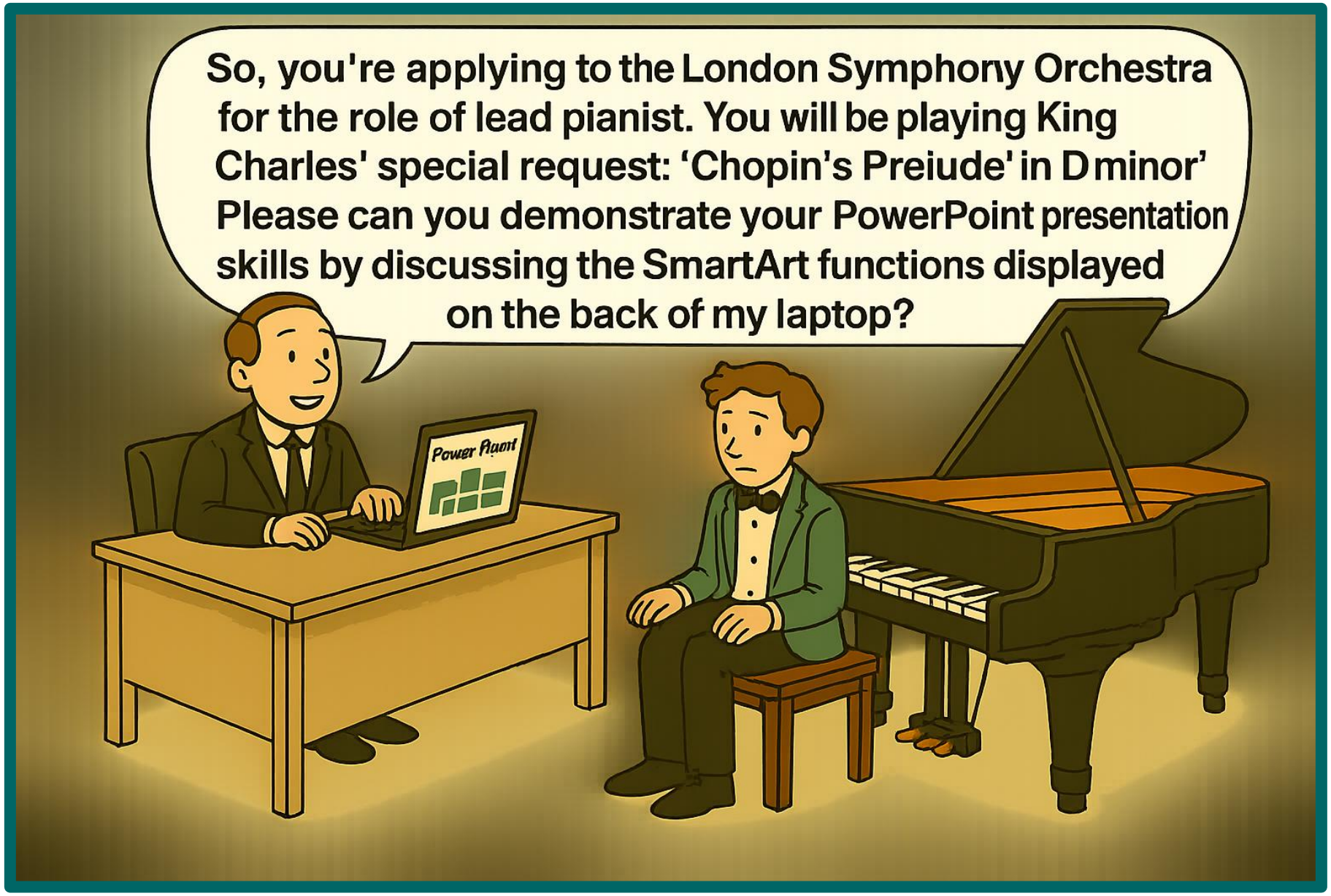
Interview insanity - PowerPoint presenting pianist



Microsoft - Neurodiversity Hiring Programme

Barrier removed:
Traditional interviews often favour candidates with strong social communication and presentation skills, which can disadvantage neurodivergent individuals (e.g. autistic candidates).

Inclusive method used:
- Extended assessment process instead of standard interviews
- Work-based tasks and projects
- Structured, transparent evaluation criteria

What they changed:
Microsoft replaced high-pressure interviews with a multi-day hiring academy where candidates:
- Work on real technical problems
- Collaborate in teams
- Demonstrate skills in a practical environment rather than through verbal performance

Impact:
- Candidates are assessed on actual ability (coding, problem-solving) rather than confidence or social style
- Reduces bias against those who struggle with eye contact, small talk, or rapid responses

Barrier removed: Over-reliance on social presentation
Focus shift: Demonstrated skills and outputs

Deloitte - Strengths-Based and Structured Interviews

Barrier removed:
Unstructured interviews often favour candidates who are **polished, confident communicators** or who have insider knowledge of “expected answers.”

Inclusive method used:
- Structured interviews with consistent questions
- Strengths-based assessment instead of competency storytelling
- Blind recruitment elements (removal of university bias in early stages)

What they changed:
Deloitte redesigned interviews to:
- Ask all candidates the same set of questions
- Focus on natural strengths and potential, not rehearsed experience
- Score responses using predefined criteria

Impact:
- Reduces bias linked to background, accent, or confidence levels
- Prevents advantage for candidates with coaching or elite education
- Creates a more objective, comparable selection process

Barrier removed: Subjective interviewer bias and “performance polish”
Focus shift: Genuine strengths and capability

Google - Work Sample Tests and Structured Hiring

Barrier removed:
- Traditional CV screening and interviews can unfairly support candidates from prestigious universities
- Those skilled at self-promotion rather than job performance

Inclusive method used:
- Work-sample tests (job-relevant tasks)
- Highly structured interviews with scoring rubrics
- Reduced reliance on CV prestige and “gut feel”

What they changed:
Google introduced
- Practical assessments (e.g., coding tasks, case problems)
- Interview panels using **standardised scoring frameworks**
- Data-driven hiring decisions rather than subjective judgment

Impact:
- Candidates succeed based on **what they can do**, not where they studied
- Ensures consistency and fairness across all applicants
- Minimises bias from interviewer impressions or “cultural fit”

Barrier removed: Bias linked to background and interview charisma
Focus shift: Measurable job-relevant skills

Key take away

Across all three companies, the core shift is the same:

Moving from

“How well can you present yourself? Performance in interviews”

to

“Can you actually do the job? Skills in action”

Reflection: Redesign recruitment to measure real ability rather than confidence, background, or ‘fit’.





Unlocking the hidden cost – the case for reasonable adjustments

Exclusion always costs more than inclusion; it just becomes apparent much later.

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Low-cost workplace adjustments

Many of the most effective adjustments are low cost or cost nothing at all.

Simple changes can significantly improve performance:

- Quiet spaces or noise-reduction options
- Clear communication options
- Task optimisation and prioritisation
- Flexible working patterns
- Predictable routines where possible

Reflection point: When we design for disability, we often make things better for everyone.” Kat Holmes.

Financial Cost of Disability Exclusion

Hard costs

- Recruitment and re-hiring (£3k–£6k+ per role)
- Increased sickness absence
- Tribunal claims and legal fees
- Lost productivity

Soft costs (that hit profit)

- Disengagement and morale drop
- Reputation and brand damage
- Missed innovation and insight
- Leadership time spent “fire-fighting”

Reflection point: What looks like a people issue today becomes a profit issue tomorrow.

The Cost of Exclusion for UK Employers (Annual Averages)

- **Increased sickness absence**: **£500 - £700** per employee per year, covering sick pay, backfill, and disruption.
- **Tribunal claims and legal fees**: **£8,000 - £30,000+** per case, with employers usually paying their own legal costs even if they win.
- **Lost productivity (including presenteeism): £1,000–£1,500** per employee per year, driven by people working while without proper understanding of the role or while unwell as a consequence of the stress/anxiety caused by the fear of incompetence/under-performance.

Reflection point: Most reasonable adjustments cost under **£100** but prevent far higher ongoing costs.

The cost of inclusion for UK employers (itemised cost)

Examples of adjustments under £100:

- **Noise-cancelling headphones** (£50 -£100): Reduce distraction and improve focus, especially in open-plan spaces. Benefit: higher concentration.
- **Fidget tools / stress aids (£5 - £20):** Support concentration, reduce anxiety and restlessness. Benefit: improved attention.
- **Screen filters or blue-light glasses (£10 - £40**): Reduce visual strain and migraines. Benefit: sustained productivity.
- **Ergonomic accessories (£15 - £50):** Improve comfort and reduce physical strain. Benefit: fewer breaks due to discomfort.
- **Assistive software (£0 - £100):** Supports reading, writing and information processing. Benefit: faster output and fewer errors.

Reflection point: £100 invested early can prevent thousands lost later.

Key take away

The real cost is *not* acting

Inaction drives £500–£1,500+ per employee annually in absence and lost productivity, plus £8k–£30k+ tribunal risks.

Relatively small investments deliver a huge return on investment

Many effective tools cost **under £100** and directly improve focus, comfort, and output for everyone not just neurodivergent employees.

Reflection: Investing £100 in the right adjustments today can prevent thousands in lost performance tomorrow.





Understanding the benefits of neurodivergent talent

Awareness of the unique perceptions, communication and social cues

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The benefits of neurodivergent talent

Innovative thinking	Brings fresh perspectives and creative problem-solving.
Strong attention to detail	Improves accuracy, quality, and risk awareness.
Deep focus and expertise	Enables high levels of concentration and specialist knowledge.
Process improvement	Identifies inefficiencies and suggests practical fixes.
Diverse perspectives	Strengthens team decision-making and outcomes.

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Understanding three key aspects of neurodivergence

1. Unique perceptions

Different ways of processing information, spotting patterns, and approaching problems.

2. Communication methods

Communication may often be more direct, clear, and literal. Some individuals may prefer technology-assisted communication or other flexible arrangements that work best for them.

3. Social cues

May find implicit social rules less clear (e.g. tone, body language, unwritten expectations), but this does not affect capability or contribution.

Practical, everyday workplace examples of the three key aspects of neurodivergence

1. Unique ways of thinking and problem-solving

Teacher (classroom)

Spots patterns in how different pupils learn and redesigns a lesson using visuals or structured steps, helping more students understand difficult content.

Supermarket shelf stacker

Organises stock in a more efficient layout (e.g. grouping by size or demand), reducing restocking time and making items easier for customers to find.

Nurse (hospital)

Notices subtle changes in a patient's behaviour or routine observations that others may miss, prompting early intervention and improving care outcomes.

2. Different communication styles and social cues are natural variations

Teacher (classroom)

Communicates clearly and directly with students, giving precise instructions rather than relying on implied expectations, which improves clarity for the whole class.

Supermarket shelf stacker

May prefer brief, task-focused communication with colleagues, but consistently completes tasks accurately and reliably.

Nurse (hospital)

Uses direct, factual communication during handovers, ensuring critical information is passed on clearly, even if social small talk is minimal.

3. Awareness helps managers recognise strengths that may be overlooked

Teacher (classroom)

A school leader recognises the teacher's structured lesson planning and consistency as a strength, rather than focusing on less informal interaction with colleagues.

Supermarket shelf stacker

A manager notices strong attention to detail and reliability, assigning responsibility for stock accuracy or planogram compliance.

Nurse (hospital)

A senior clinician values the nurse's precision, routine focus, and pattern recognition, involving them in tasks like monitoring trends or auditing patient data.

Key take away

Different brains, different brilliance
Not everyone's brain works the same way…that's exactly where the blessing lies!

Communication styles ≠ capability levels
Direct, structured, or "straight to the point"? That's efficiency, not a flaw.

Social cues aren't a performance metric
Being great at reading between the lines isn't the same as being great at the job.

What you see isn't all you get
Some of the best strengths are the easiest to overlook—unless you know where to look.

Reflection point: "If we stop hiring for 'polished', we start benefiting from 'brilliant'."





Legal, compliant and confident

Legal duties -

Reflection point: Compliance is the baseline. Inclusion is the ambition.

Equality Act 2010

Who must comply?

- All UK employers, regardless of size
- Applies to recruitment, employment, training and dismissal

Key duties

- No discrimination, harassment or victimisation
- Duty to make reasonable adjustments
- Disability includes physical, mental and hidden conditions

Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED)

Who must comply?

- Public bodies and organisations delivering public functions
- Also relevant to contractors and partners

Requirements

- Eliminate discrimination
- Advance equality of opportunity
- Foster good relations

Disability Confident Scheme - Purpose and process (Diagram)

A simple flow diagram showing:

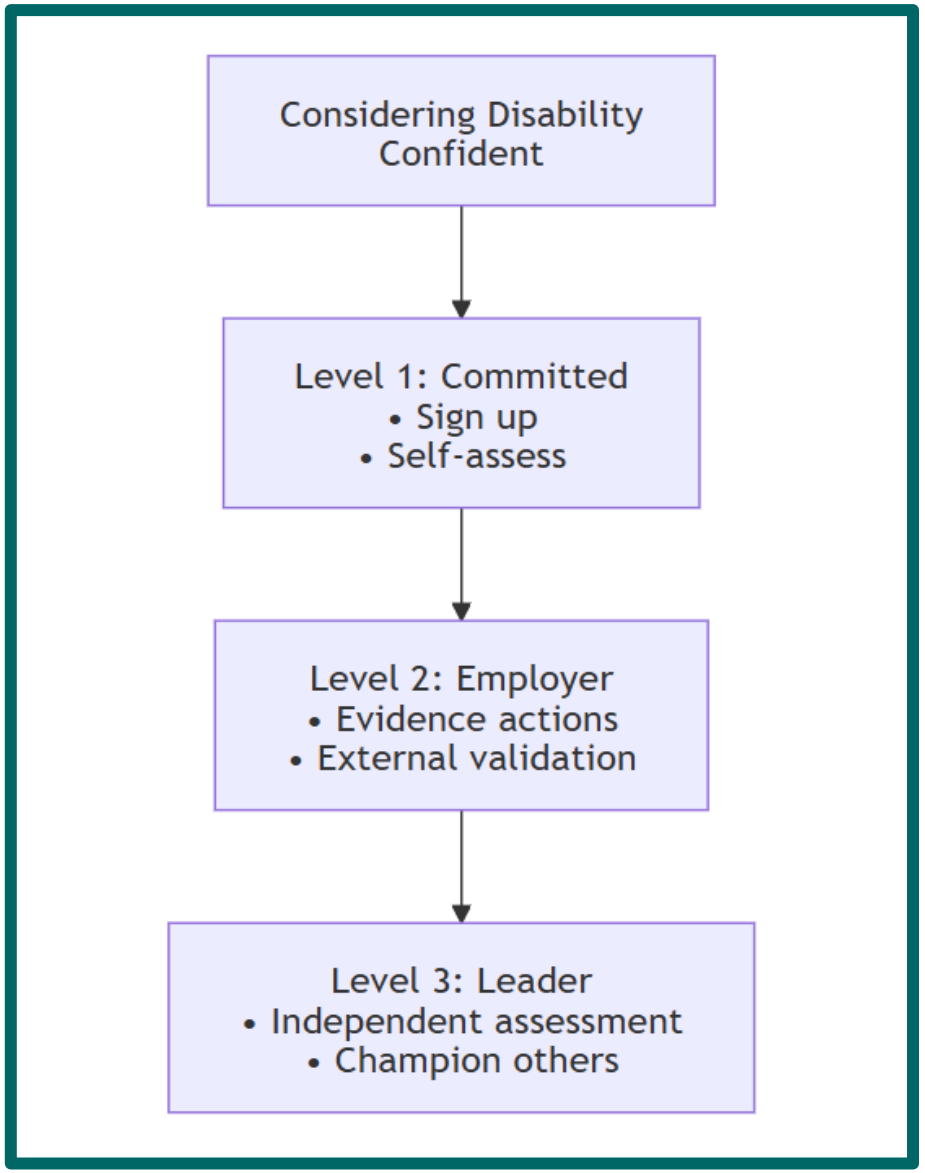
Purpose: Inclusive recruitment → Retention → Business performance

Stages:

1. Disability Confident Committed
2. Disability Confident Employer
3. Disability Confident Leader

Process: Commit → Review → Improve → Lead

Reflection point: Disability inclusion isn't about lowering standards; it's about raising stars.





Support neurodivergent individuals to be radically authentic and understand that they are not required to mask and assimilate.



- Focus on ability not assumptions Remove barriers through reasonable adjustments
- Create environments where people can perform at their best

- Look for problem solvers with digital and assistive technology strengths
- Look for innovative thinkers who challenge group think
- Look for resilience and adaptability
- Look for loyalty and commitment
- Look for empathy and emotional intelligence

Look for **O**pportunities to **V**alue and **E**steem