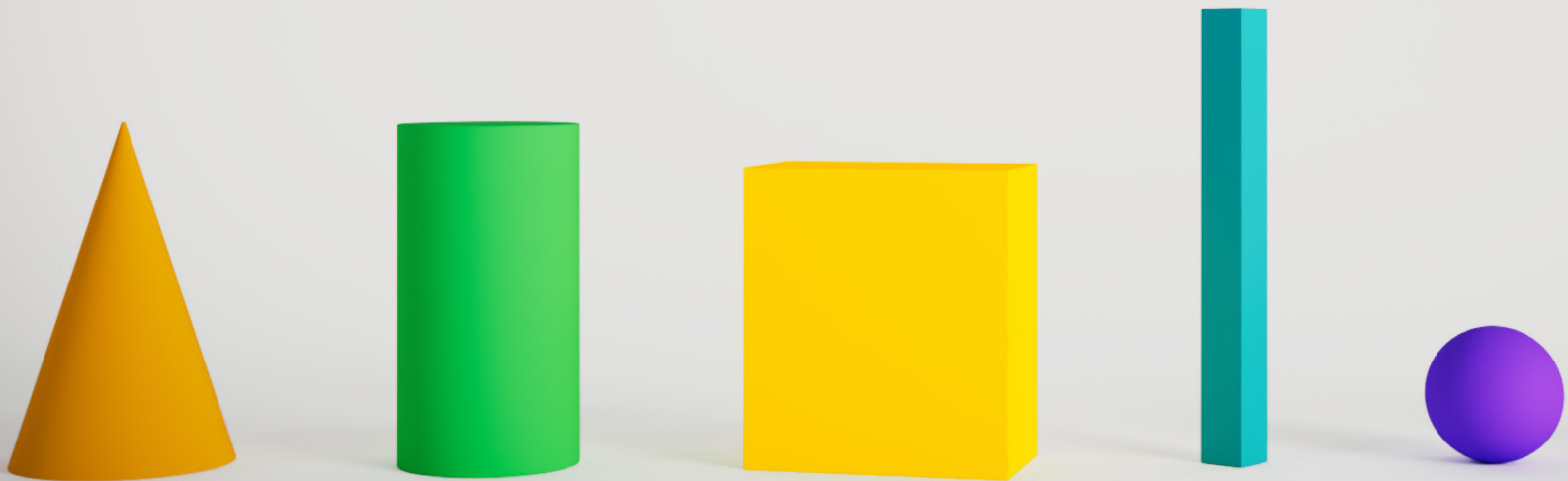


# Neuroinclusivity in the Workplace

## A Four Part Series

For neurodivergent individuals, typical work environments can pose challenges most people do not experience to the same degree – or at all. With increasing diagnoses, recognition, and acceptance, neurodiversity is impacting workplace planning now and will for years to come. In this **blog series**, we will explore essential strategies and considerations for companies to use in workplace planning, design, and change management – creating more inclusive work settings for all employees.



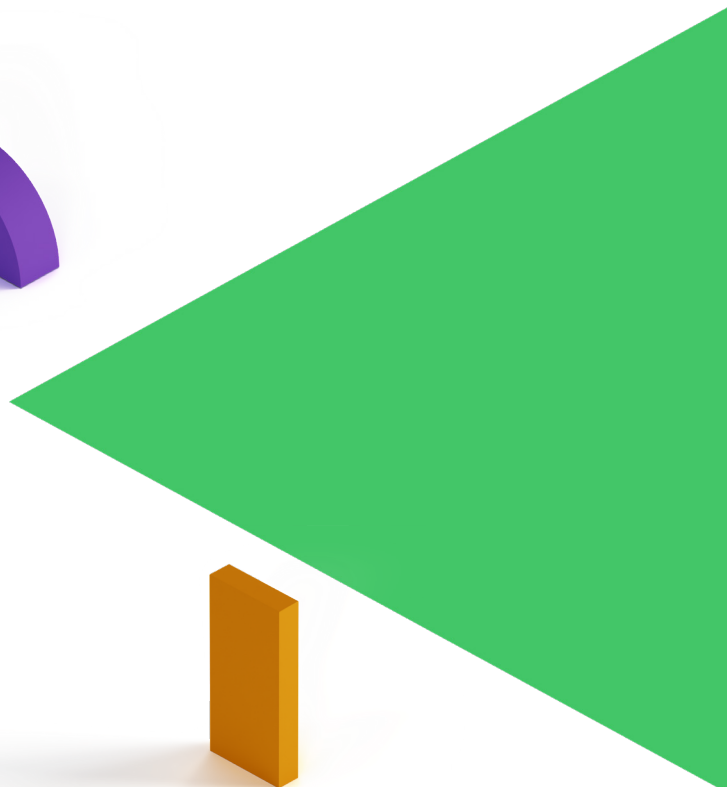
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# Why Companies Need to Plan for Neurodiversity Now

As organizations ponder new ways to appeal to the office user postpandemic, neurodiversity deserves a place in the conversation.

User experience metrics — productivity, comfort, and well-being, to name a few — are reshaping how we assess workplace effectiveness. Neurodivergent individuals naturally experience and interact with their work environments differently. Understanding the broad diversity of people's experiences and needs at work is the beginning of developing a more efficient and productive workplace.

Companies that fail to plan for neurodiversity now may find themselves in a position similar to those who missed opportunities to launch timely ESG (Environmental, Social, and Governance) or DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives. A 2021 [survey](#) revealed that 59% of businesses lost out on work due to weak ESG commitments. Another study found that 68% of workers would consider switching jobs if their employer lacked an effective DEI policy. Planning for neurodiversity is a fundamental piece of DEI, and it will give employers a strong competitive advantage in both recruitment and business performance.

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## What is Neurodiversity?

Neurodiversity, or neurodivergence, refers to differences in human cognition that affect functions such as sociability, learning, or attention. It encompasses the autism spectrum, dyslexia, dyspraxia (difficulty with movement and coordination), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and Tourette syndrome, among other types. With as many as 15 to 20% of the U.S. population thought to be neurodiverse, employers have a strong impetus to understand what it means, who it impacts, and how the workplace can evolve to support neurodivergent people more effectively.



### Neurodiversity [noor-oh-di-vur-si-tee]

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Anything that is designed to include both neurodiverse and neurotypical people.



## Understanding Neurodiverse Talent

Medical, social, and cultural trends around neurodiversity are converging in ways that should capture employers' attention. Data reveals steadily increasing diagnoses of a range of neurodiverse conditions, such as autism (from 1 in 150 children in 2000 to 1 in 36 in 2020, according to the CDC) and developmental disabilities (of children aged 3 to 17, an increase from 16.2% in 2009-2011 to 17.8% in 2015-2017). As diagnoses rise, social acceptance increases. Having grown up in this context, today's teenagers and young adults are far more comfortable with openly discussing and advocating for their needs than previous generations, which will carry through to their working lives.

Companies that plan well will benefit from what is likely to be an **influx of neurodivergent employees** in the coming years. While autism spectrum and other disorders create obstacles in some areas, they confer exceptional skills and functioning in others, such as **attention to detail, concentration levels, memory, creative skills, and mathematical comprehension**. Specialist recruitment agencies and other advocacy organizations now promote the untapped skills and talents of neurodivergent employees. Case studies of employers who have found success with recruiting neurodivergent employees are multiplying. In one example, JPMorgan reported that "autistic workers were doing the work of people who took three years to ramp up - and were even 50 percent more productive" after three to six months serving in the bank's Mortgage Banking Technology group.

Despite the talents they offer, neurodivergent individuals face significant barriers in getting hired. Eighty-five percent of college graduates with autism spectrum disorders were unemployed as of 2019. This gap in the labor market presents an unprecedented **opportunity for employers**. To seize that opportunity, companies can get ahead of the curve by positioning their workplace policies, strategies, and environments for the future now.

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Specialist recruitment agencies and other advocacy organizations now promote the untapped skills and talents of neurodivergent employees.

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# 85%

of college graduates with autism spectrum disorders were **unemployed** as of 2019.





# What's Going on in **Your** Workplace?

Macrotrends are a compelling reason to act, but some companies may already have an internal need regarding neurodiversity. Organizations across the board have been thinking more deeply and strategically about what makes people work at their best and are making changes to their work environments to encourage it. Accommodating the needs of neurodivergent employees is an exercise in **better understanding your overall workforce**. Many needs that neurodivergent people have — sensitivities to light or sound, for example — intersect at some level with those of neurotypical employees. Planning and design strategies for one group can improve the experiences of a diverse range of employees — and give people a useful alternative to the home office.

Perhaps your company is looking to invest in a DEI program with broad reach and real impact. Or, your company already employs neurodivergent individuals who are not getting what they need from an office culture or environment that hasn't changed since before the pandemic. If either of these scenarios ring true, it's time to **start thinking more seriously** about planning for a more neuroinclusive workplace.

## How to **Strategize** for Neurodiversity in the Workplace

Savills believes that planning and designing for neurodiversity is leaning into the future of the workplace and the workforce, and thus good for business. Neurodiversity is a concept that may be new for many organizations. In this blog series, we will share insights on planning, design, and change management concepts that will help companies understand, anticipate, and navigate a necessary shift in the corporate world. In the coming weeks, we will explore:



### **Strategic Planning**

Before any spatial or policy changes take place, what does the strategic planning and engagement process look like? How can companies plan for near-term and longer-term changes and how can they test specific design strategies before investing in them? We will delve into essential questions and considerations.



### **Design**

Everyday elements of office design can create obstacles to productivity for neurodiverse talent. What steps should a company take to determine the right design approach for neuroinclusivity? We will discuss common areas of concern and strategies for adopting effective solutions.



### **Change Management**

Once you've decided on the changes to make — how do you introduce them successfully? Supporting a shift toward neuroinclusivity is an exercise in cultural change. We will explain vital considerations that will help companies achieve buy-in.



# Strategic Planning for Neuroinclusive Workplaces

The case for designing a more inclusive workplace for neurodivergent employees is strong. As we outlined in [Part One](#), companies stand to gain significantly from the unique skills and talents of the neurodiverse workforce, which continues to experience high unemployment as diagnoses increase. But creating neuroinclusive workspaces requires strategic planning and stakeholder engagement. What are some key strategic considerations for employers prior to designing a neuroinclusive office?

## Key Planning Questions

Companies looking to update their workplace strategy over a longer timeline can start the process by asking several key questions to drive decision-making:

**Who are your current employees, and how might future recruitment goals impact space?** Knowing your organization's current employees and future hiring goals is foundational to understanding future space needs. Perhaps your company currently employs neurodivergent individuals with unmet needs at work, or as part of a DEI initiative, the company would like to explore bringing more neurodiverse talent on board. Identifying the appropriate resources at this stage can help start the process.

There is a growing list of specialist consulting firms that can work with your company to provide essential information about the unique needs of neurodivergent employees in the workplace and creating a more neuroinclusive culture. Recruitment firms that work exclusively with neurodivergent individuals can connect you with neurodiverse talent and help find the right fit for the skillsets you seek.

By understanding the make-up of your current and future workforce with respect to neurodiverse talent, you can begin to plan for necessary policy or space changes.

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**Where are there current unmet needs?** Assessing current unmet needs in the workplace may not always yield a complete picture. It is important to remember that personal health conditions and diagnoses are confidential information that no employee is under any obligation to disclose. Regardless, there are several ways companies can build a more inclusive culture in which neurodivergent employees are empowered to provide feedback on their work environment if they choose. The bigger picture is creating a foundation in the workplace for dialogue to comfortably take place.

This can include an HR-led effort to develop affinity groups within the workplace that give neurodivergent employees centralized resources for sharing, discussing, and advocating for neurodiversity needs. Company-wide education about neurodiversity can help broaden awareness, understanding, and empathy among all employees. Training managers to follow specific processes and protocols if their team members disclose conditions will facilitate more openness and reassurance for employees who choose to discuss needs with their supervisors.

Issuing a confidential survey can help in collecting data on workplace usage and preferences directly. (See “Engagement Process” later in this post.) Re-issuing the survey at regular intervals can help employers keep tabs on evolving needs and preferences.

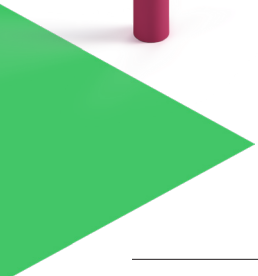


**TIP:**

*Issuing a confidential survey can help in collecting data on workplace usage and preferences directly. (See “Engagement Process” later in this post.) Re-issuing the survey at regular intervals can help employers keep tabs on evolving needs and preferences.*

**How will our preferred design strategy accommodate neurodivergent employees?** Perhaps your organization has decided that a shift to an entirely new design strategy is the right long-term move – for example, from a floor plan of private offices and workstations to a more open, activity-based workplace that incorporates a greater variety of focused and collaborative space types. In this case, considering what additional space types may be needed for neurodivergent employees, and how to incorporate them seamlessly into the floor plan, must factor into the overall strategy.

Different design approaches can have a range of impacts on neurodivergent employees. For example, a work environment without assigned seating may pose problems for employees who require a strict routine or a familiar or customized setup from day to day – for example, assistive technology tools or ergonomic accessories. Understanding that one size will not fit all is essential before committing to any design strategy. Building flexibility into a chosen approach – for example, designating limited assigned spaces within an otherwise unassigned floor plan can help accommodate employees who need this.





**Is pilot space appropriate for our timeline?** Many companies planning for significant space changes find it useful to run a beta test or pilot program. [One survey](#) found that 93% of companies post-pandemic were planning to run pilots to help reconfigure their workspaces. Piloting a new space type can help companies gather usage data that will guide choices on furniture, equipment, and floor plan configurations. It's a time to experiment, compare, make "safe" mistakes, and then correct them before committing to any major workplace investments on a larger scale.

One of the key advantages of taking the time and space to pilot is the opportunity it provides for employee engagement. Testing new space configurations, or even policies, such as a hybrid work strategy, enables employees to directly experience the change for a period of time after which they can provide critical feedback. For companies undertaking a first attempt to address neurodiversity needs, this is valuable data to work with.

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**of companies post-pandemic were planning to run pilots to help reconfigure their workspaces.**

## Engagement Process

Effective strategic planning is based on a thorough engagement process to understand current and future needs. This process touches just about everybody, from company leadership to specific user groups. It can utilize a variety of mediums, such as surveys, focus groups, interviews, and visioning sessions, to gather detailed input that will guide decision-making. Your workplace strategist can guide you and all relevant groups through this process.

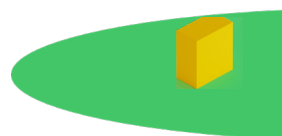
Your workplace strategy team can take steps to ensure that this important data gathering stage is inclusive of neurodivergent employees. For example, a typical survey we would issue might include questions about common environmental sensitivities people with neurodivergent conditions might have. We would issue the survey to all employees or specified user groups. This avoids singling out neurodivergent employees, as well as captures the preferences of neurotypical employees who have similar space or environmental needs, such as sensitivity to sound or light.

Another important aspect of the engagement process to bring stakeholders together in educational workshops. Your workplace strategy team will use workshops to share key data about your company's work environment as well as workplace research and trends. Targeting leadership in these workshops is key. With [55% of leaders](#) out of touch with their employees' perceptions, leadership must become more aware through data and trends on the employee experience. This is also the best opportunity in the early planning stages to share knowledge across user groups, such as HR and IT, that can broadly educate stakeholders on potential space needs for neurodivergent employees, cultivating greater awareness and preparedness.

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**Over half** of leaders are out of touch with their employee's perception.

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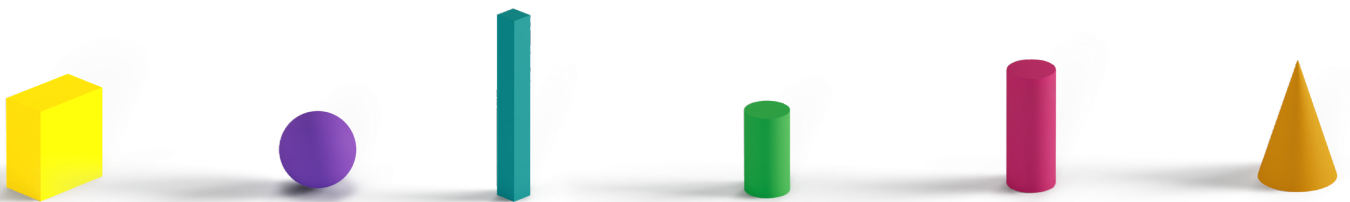




# Laying the Foundation for Change

Asking the right strategic questions can help employers build a powerful neuroinclusivity initiative in the workplace. Promoting a neuroinclusive culture ahead of any workplace modifications — by developing support resources, manager training, and staff education — will lay a solid foundation for successful design changes. Leading inclusive engagement processes and investing in pilot programs can help employers gain a clearer vision of what exactly needs to change. With these strategic efforts in place, employers need not fear leaping into the unknown.

Promoting a neuroinclusive culture ahead of any workplace modifications — by developing support resources, manager training, and staff education — will lay a solid foundation for successful design changes.



# Workplace Design Considerations for Neurodivergent Employees

After a company has decided to update its workplace design to support neuroinclusivity, what are the crucial considerations? In this week's discussion of neurodiversity in the workplace, we will look at methods companies can use for testing design strategies before they invest, as well as elements of office design that present opportunities for fostering neuroinclusivity.

## Mock-ups and Pilot Space to Get to the Right Design Strategy

After a period of [strategic planning](#), companies may find it useful to test a design strategy before committing to any changes, especially where specific changes regarding neuroinclusivity are concerned. There are two valuable methods that can help companies gather data and employee feedback that will shape the outcomes of the design.

**Mock-ups** provide the earliest opportunity in the design process to solicit user feedback. A mock-up space is an informal, quickly built test space that gives employees a sampling of the functionality or intent of a design. It is used to elicit initial reactions from employees prior to building out a full pilot space. Employers can use mock-ups to evaluate several different design options, from furniture strategies to layout, before proceeding through the design phase.

An option but beneficial next step when planning neuroinclusive workspaces is to establish a **pilot program**. One of many potential reasons for a pilot is to test new technologies, policies, or workplace designs.

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Running a successful pilot involves administering a continuous feedback cycle. The following cycle describes how to initiate and process the data that a pilot yields:

### Generate Buy-in

Engage leadership, as well as HR and IT, and set realistic expectations for outcomes for the initiative.

### Collect Feedback

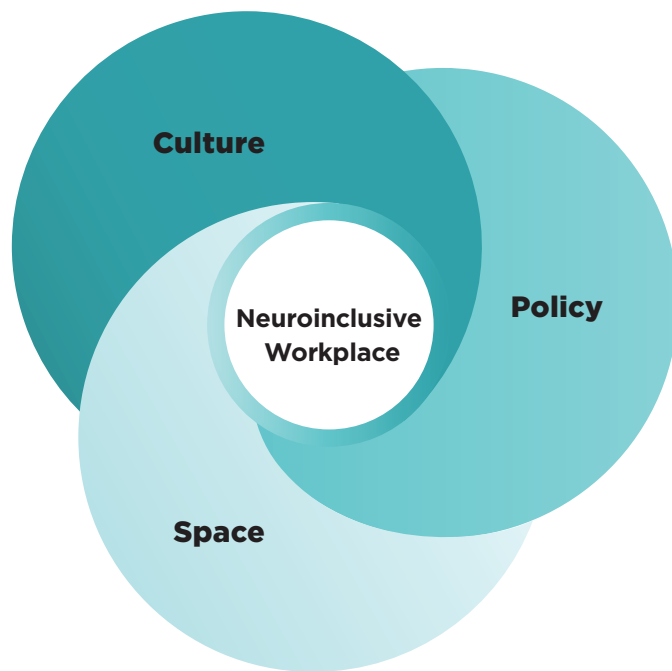
Solicit live feedback as well as reactions from users via survey after they have spent time in the pilot space. In addition to employee feedback, use occupancy sensors to collect and produce useful quantitative data on space usage. Analyze the data against the desired future state for the office to identify gaps.

### Analyze

Leverage data and user feedback to inform further tweaks or changes within the pilot space to arrive at the most user-friendly scenario.

Because neuroinclusive workplace design can impact so many aspects of the physical work environment, we recommend this strategy for any company who can commit the time and resources. Many organizations — [as many as 93% surveyed post-pandemic](#) — turned to piloting before adopting permanent workplace changes.

Piloting involves setting aside space, whether small or large, on- or off-site, and engaging with users to trial a particular design strategy within it. The pilot space is essentially a living lab: employees will use the space from day to day just as they would a permanent office for an extended period of time. Knowing how to pilot test a space is especially important when working to achieve a neuroinclusive workplace. It's a process that enables the company to continually test or re-test products or environments as staff grows or changes, ensuring that neurodiverse talent has access to an optimal working environment.



## Design Considerations

What does a neuroinclusive office look like? Just as no two neurodivergent individuals have an identical experience, it would be impossible to identify one perfect neuroinclusive design model for the office. But one thing is certain - culture, policy, and space are closely intertwined, and a workplace that functions best for neurodiversity [starts with a culture](#) that supports it. In that spirit, the following three principles should guide implementation of any design or work policy changes aimed at fostering neuroinclusivity:



### Offer options and choices wherever possible

Keeping a diversity of options available in furniture, equipment, and space types meets a wider range of needs at work — for neurodivergent and neurotypical employees.



### Educate, train, and de-stigmatize

Empowering neurodivergent employees to ask for what they need in their space starts with creating an open, understanding environment at work. By educating employees on neurodiversity, including training managers who lead teams, companies can broaden awareness and de-stigmatize disclosure of a condition or a specific request for furniture or equipment at work.



### Keep information accessible and transparent

Ensuring all employees have access to the same options and information will help neurodivergent people obtain the tools they need for a better work experience. Companies can, for example, make it clear that employees may request assistive technology or specific furniture products by posting the information on a company intranet or issuing regular reminders that choices are available.

By keeping these three principles in mind, companies can develop a more neuroinclusive approach to designing workspace. Let's take a look at how these principles intersect with a range of design features in the office:



### Furniture

Employees with autism, ADHD, or sensory processing disorders may benefit from specific furniture products and accessories to help them focus on work or control anxiety — for example, soft seating or an under-desk elliptical. Just as many companies now offer ergonomic furniture options, they can also offer a selection of task chairs and other desk accessories to meet the needs of neurodivergent employees. As suggested above, making sure all employees know these options are available, and removing the stigma of asking — perhaps by not requiring a doctor's note — will foster neuroinclusivity.



### Technology

A range of technologies exist to help neurodivergent people alleviate sensitivities or support different ways of processing information. Software and apps that read text out loud, reduce blue light, or offer intentional controls over web surfing to reduce distractions are a few examples. Here again, education removes stigma. Making these products available to order and broadly advertising this at work can help neurodivergent employees feel confident in requesting what they need.





### Visual Distractions

Autistic people may experience sensitivity to color, especially bright colors or patterns. Offering options in work settings that incorporate neutral, soothing tones can ease this difficulty. Employers may designate stationary environments, such as desks, with more muted colors. Transitional spaces, such as hallways, should not be forgotten.



### Light and Temperature

Both of these ambient features can impact people with neurodivergent conditions. As many as half of all autistic people may have a [severe sensitivity to fluorescent lighting](#). For example, non-fluorescent lighting, dimmable task lighting, and small zoned controls are a few design elements which can mitigate sensitivities to light and temperature.



### Scent

People with autism or sensory processing disorders may feel adversely impacted by certain smells in their work environment. Educating employees to be thoughtful about their own choices — for example, being mindful about wearing strong fragrances at work or a policy on heating potent smelling foods — can help create awareness of this issue. Zoning areas of the office to create a meaningful separation, such as between workstations and eating areas, can mitigate the impact for neurodivergent employees.

## A Neuroinclusive Approach to Workplace Design

Designing a neuroinclusive workplace is not about making drastic or dramatic changes. It's about making smart choices that build enough flexibility into a space to make it open, usable, and productive for everyone, whether neurotypical or neurodivergent. By starting with a testing strategy such as a mock-up or pilot program, companies can gather valuable data on any design strategy before choosing a solution. By following the three principles of offering choice, educating and de-stigmatizing, and keeping information accessible, companies can roll out simple but effective design changes that support all employees' productivity in a more inclusive and welcoming environment.



# Change Management for a Neuroinclusive Workplace

Your company has made the investment and the effort to become a neuroinclusive workplace — with the buy-in of leadership, the company has engaged in a [strategic planning process](#) and adopted [neuroinclusive space](#) or policy approaches in the work environment. Now what?

Organizational and workplace change affects all people, at various points. For this reason, it's necessary to have structured process to bridge the gap from an existing state to the desired future state. This is called **change management**. Managing the journey to a more neuroinclusive workplace is especially important if the concept of neurodiversity is new to a majority of employees. It may require a change in thinking, shifts in behavior, and an understanding of new space types or tools at work. Let's take a closer look at some key guiding principles for this process.

## Communication is Core to Change

Because of its broad impact, organizational change will always be more successful with the buy-in and participation of employees. Therefore, integrating employees into the process of change is ideal. The implementation of any change begins with leadership's buy-in and continues with strong advocacy. From here, generating employees' enthusiasm and support for change starts in the earliest planning stages and continues until the organization reaches its desired state.

The following principles and practices will drive a change management process that promotes participation and achieves change with broad buy-in:

### Neurodiversity

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### Neurotypical

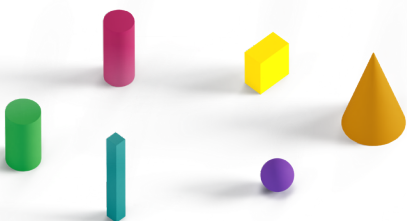
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### Early exposure and buy-in

Ideally, before any company adopts space or policy changes, they will begin with a testing strategy such as a mock-up (for space) or a pilot ([for space, policy, or technology](#)). This allows employees to be involved in the process and exposes them to possible new workspaces or ways of working. It is leadership's time to solicit feedback, while also giving employees ownership in the outcome and to spark some excitement for what is to come.



### Communication plan

Communication is the core of any change management process. When the company has opted to implement new space, a new policy direction, and/or new tools, it is time to communicate these changes broadly and prepare employees for new ways of using space or working.

Your change management team can work closely with a corporate communications group, if applicable, to determine the timing and channels of communication. This may involve multiple mediums – for example, a series of all-staff meetings or lunch and learns accompanied by regular updates on a company intranet and an internal email campaign.

Any communication plan must be set up as a two-way system. All employees should be encouraged to ask questions or air concerns and be given the proper platforms to do it, whether it's participating in a Q&A session at an all-staff meeting, submitting feedback anonymously online, or scheduling an in-person meeting with an HR representative.

Organizational change should never happen *to* anyone in the workplace. Rather, the goal is to implement a communications plan to encourage participation, foster understanding and ownership, and communicate roles and responsibilities. When employees have a clear picture of what is ahead and how it will benefit everyone, they are more likely to feel involved and offer support.

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**Organizational change should never happen *to* anyone in the workplace. When employees are integrated into the transition and given the space to offer feedback, they are more likely to support the change.**

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## Change Management: Who is Involved?

**Senior Leadership:** Help champion the change and encourage participation.

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**Team Managers:** Rally their teams behind the change and serve as a conduit of information.

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**Human Resources:** Provide insight on workplace policy and culture.

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**Legal:** Oversee training and communications to ensure compliance.

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**Information Technology:** Manage the roll-out of new technology.

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**DEI Task Force:** If available, to support neurodivergent employees and advocate for change.

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**Corporate Communications:** Plan the communication and outreach strategy.

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**Real Estate & Facilities Groups:** Weigh in on changes to space usage that may impact building use.

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**Employees:** Provide feedback and help move the organization toward the desired state.



### Education and training

The foundation of achieving a neuroinclusive workplace is cultural change. Sharing knowledge company-wide and training managers will spark the cultural shift. Ideally, education and training will begin during the [strategic planning phase](#) and continue through design and post-design as the change is communicated location- or company-wide.

Spreading awareness of neurodiversity can start with holding workshops or information sessions with consultants who specialize in the subject. From here, train managers in best practices for supporting employees who disclose neurodiverse conditions or needs at work. Managing a team with diverse needs and work styles requires flexibility and empathy.

General training should be offered to all employees, making the same information accessible to all, such as how to request special equipment, furniture, or technology, or how to request or access designated space types. For neurodivergent employees, supplementing widely available information with access to other support resources, such as a DEI or neurodiversity affinity groups, can help build a truly inclusive environment.

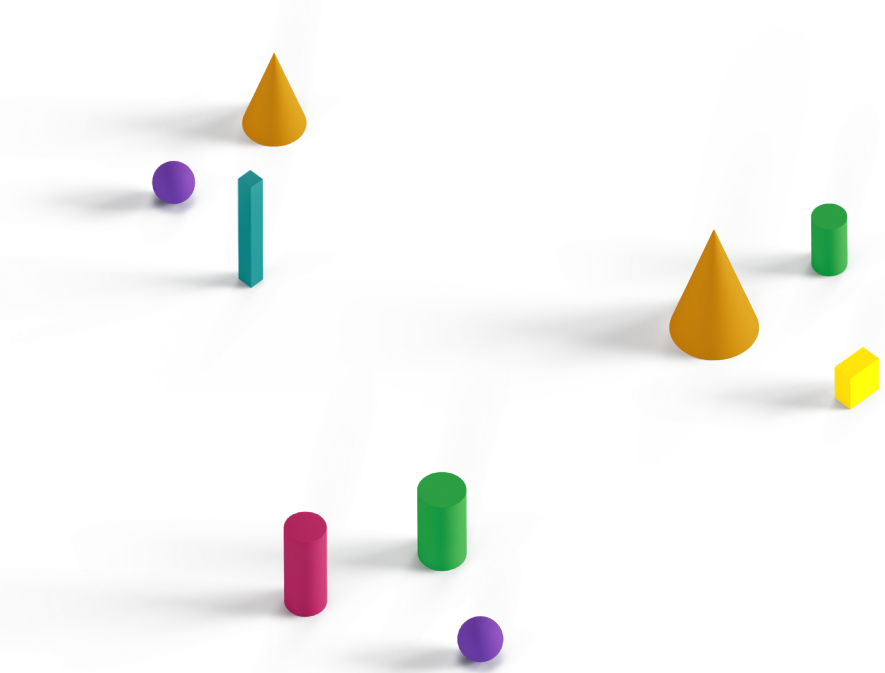


### Success metrics

Implementing change without assessing the outcomes stifles growth and possibility. Remember to measure the return on your investment. Your change management team will work with you to establish KPIs at the beginning of the change management process. At a predetermined time after the conclusion of the process (for example, six months), it is useful to collect data to measure against the KPIs.

Whatever the outcome of this post-change evaluation, it will be important for companies to critically engage with the feedback they receive and make the necessary adjustments. Leaving workspace or policy changes in place that are not working can have a corrosive effect over time, in the form of employee attrition or disengagement.

While this would constitute the end of a project for a change management team, many companies may choose to adopt a regular cadence of review and adjustments. Doing so allows the company to remain proactive in assessing workplace effectiveness. Given the continuing rise in diagnoses of [neurodiverse conditions](#), companies that are truly interested in maintaining a neuroinclusive culture will want to ensure they stay connected to how their workplace functions as new talent onboards and needs to evolve.







## Committing to Change

In this series, we've examined how the corporate world will benefit from [embracing neurodiversity](#), how to [strategically plan the workplace](#) to support neurodiverse talent, essential workplace [design considerations](#) and how to manage the change. It's a marathon, not a sprint; but following a structured, incremental process — and leaving room to learn from mistakes — will yield results. For companies genuinely committed to fostering an inclusive culture and harnessing invaluable skills and talents, embarking on a neurodiversity initiative is a shrewd and powerful strategy.

## Savills Workplace & Change Management Experts

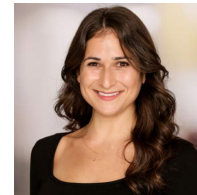
### Series Authors



**[Benay Josselson](#)**  
Executive Vice  
President



**[Tonya M. Williams](#)**  
Managing  
Director



**[Alli Hochberg](#)**  
Senior Program  
Manager

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