

How to build a neurodiversity-friendly workplace, according to an autistic female founder

In the fast-paced world of startups and entrepreneurship, diversity and inclusivity are no longer just buzzwords; they are key factors that drive innovation and success. Neurodiversity - a term describing differences in the way people's brains work that covers autism, ADHD, dyslexia and tourettes - offers a unique opportunity for startups to tap into a pool of underutilised talent who literally think outside the box.

Temps de lecture : minute

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From hyperfocus and creativity to attention to detail and lateral thinking, the strengths of neurodiverse people have been widely recorded.

In the UK 1 in 7 people are neurodivergent, meaning that 15% of Britain's population are part of this group. There has also been a surge in diagnoses in the UK, with an 800% increase in autism diagnosis over the past two decades and a 400% increase in adults seeking an ADHD diagnosis since 2020. Yet the startup ecosystem often fails to accommodate their needs.

As an autistic female founder building a product that supports neurodivergent people with their mental health - with a team that has either lived or learned experience of neurodiversity - I know there are a number of things startups can do to build a neurodiverse-friendly culture that will enable this talented group of people to flourish.

These inclusivity tips are beneficial for everyone. They are about simplifying and clarifying processes, listening to the needs of your staff and creating environments where people can be themselves.

Educate yourself first and understand your why

Before updating your policies, publishing a job ad or hiring a neurodivergent employee, you need to educate yourself about the latest thinking on neurodiversity so you can make informed changes to your organisation.

A good place to start are the following key concepts to frame your work on neurodiversity:

- Neurodiversity is a spectrum: there is massive variation between neurodivergent people, even those with the same diagnosis or label. One-size-fits-all initiatives won't work so focus on personalisation and providing choices so people can opt-in to what works for them.
- Focus on strengths: "asset-based" approaches focus on the strengths your neurodivergent employees bring to your organisation and shapes their roles and career progression around these strengths, so they're set-up to succeed right from the beginning.
- Neurodiversity is not a "superpower": focusing on strengths doesn't mean ignoring the challenges your neurodivergent employees will inevitably face in environments that are designed for neurotypical ways of working. Understand and accommodate scenarios that might be difficult for them and don't be afraid of getting it wrong and taking on feedback to improve it for next time. Understand that neurodivergent strengths can be a double-edged sword - an employee hyperfocused on an important business objective means their productivity will skyrocket, but if they forget to take breaks or practice self-care they'll burn out in a few months.

- Not all neurodivergent people have a formal diagnosis: waiting times in the UK for an adult ADHD or autism diagnosis can be 3-5 years, or even longer depending on where you live. Women and people of colour tend to be under or even misdiagnosed and so may be less likely to have a formal diagnosis. Don't make accommodations dependent on medical certification of someone's neurodivergence and be open to employees who self-identify as neurodivergent.
- Understand the benefits *universal design* will bring to your organisation: policies and practices you implement for neurodivergent employees will create a flexible working culture and environment that will benefit other groups, from working parents to employees living with long-term health conditions.

Being knowledgeable on the above means you can explain the rationale behind neurodiversity-friendly changes to your organisation's processes, policies and practices to employees.

It will also help you understand why you are making these changes. Do you want to be an inclusive employer to set yourself apart from your competitors? Do you want to expand your hiring pool in a competitive talent marketplace? Do you want to build an intentional culture from the ground up?

Champion inclusivity from the start

An inclusive startup culture begins with an inclusive hiring process. When seeking new team members, make it clear that your startup actively welcomes neurodivergent individuals.

Embed this commitment to inclusivity in your job applications and clearly state that you are interested in hearing from neurodiverse people and be specific about why. Have an equality, diversity and inclusion statement on your website that outlines your commitment to inclusivity. Share this

message across all your communication channels, so that people can find this information easily.

By taking these straightforward yet effective communication steps, you can attract neurodiverse talent that might otherwise hesitate to join your team.

Simplify the application process and remove bias

In the bustling world of startups, efficiency is key. Streamline your application process to ensure it's accessible to all. Whether it's a concise cover letter or a user-friendly online form, keep it simple. This prevents potential barriers that could prevent neurodivergent candidates from applying. For example, a long written application may be more difficult for some with dyslexia or ADHD.

Avoid using psychometric or personality tests to make recruitment decisions, as they have been designed on neurotypical ways of working and actively discriminate against neurodivergent candidates. If your recruitment process requires them, make sure to weigh other elements of the candidate's performance more heavily in your hiring decision. Better yet, design a task that will help you get the information you need about a candidate's ability and let them work on it in their own time.

If you are using a recruitment agency, find one that specialises in hiring neurodiverse talent or has inclusive recruitment processes in place.

Remember, keeping things simple and accessible is one of the most inclusive things you can do when hiring. It also makes the process easier for any candidate who would like to be considered for a role, not just neurodivergent talent.

Conduct inclusive interviews

Interviews are pivotal moments for startups. Not only do you get a chance to meet your potential candidate, it's also an opportunity for them to check out your credentials as a neurodiversity-friendly employer.

Opt for inclusive practices such as asking if the candidate needs any accommodations beforehand and sharing an outline of the interview or even the questions you will ask to help reduce anxiety and help the candidate perform at their best.

Offer virtual interviews and allow candidates to choose whether or not to use cameras. This accommodates individuals who may find visual or in-person interaction challenging and reduces the cognitive load during the interview itself. Additionally, offer flexible interview scheduling to cater to the preferences of your candidates and avoid scheduling interviews back-to-back.

First impressions count and are a reflection of your culture, be sure to make someone feel as comfortable and as welcome as possible.

Tailor solutions to individuals

Startups thrive on uniqueness and being small and agile means they can adopt flexible approaches with ease.

Recognise that each individual's neurodivergence is different and that the way it affects them will be shaped by their identity, personality and surroundings. Work closely with team members to identify benefits that cater to their specific needs. This could involve flexible hours, remote work options, creating a tailored schedule or personalised support. This is all about creating an environment that enables people to maximise their strengths while working in a way that suits their needs, leading to

increased productivity and creative output for your company.

Do this from the start and build in regular check-ins to ensure their requirements are met as they contribute to your startup's success.

Nurture a supportive environment

As *burnout is more likely to affect neurodiverse people*, creating a safe space for open discussions about well-being is crucial.

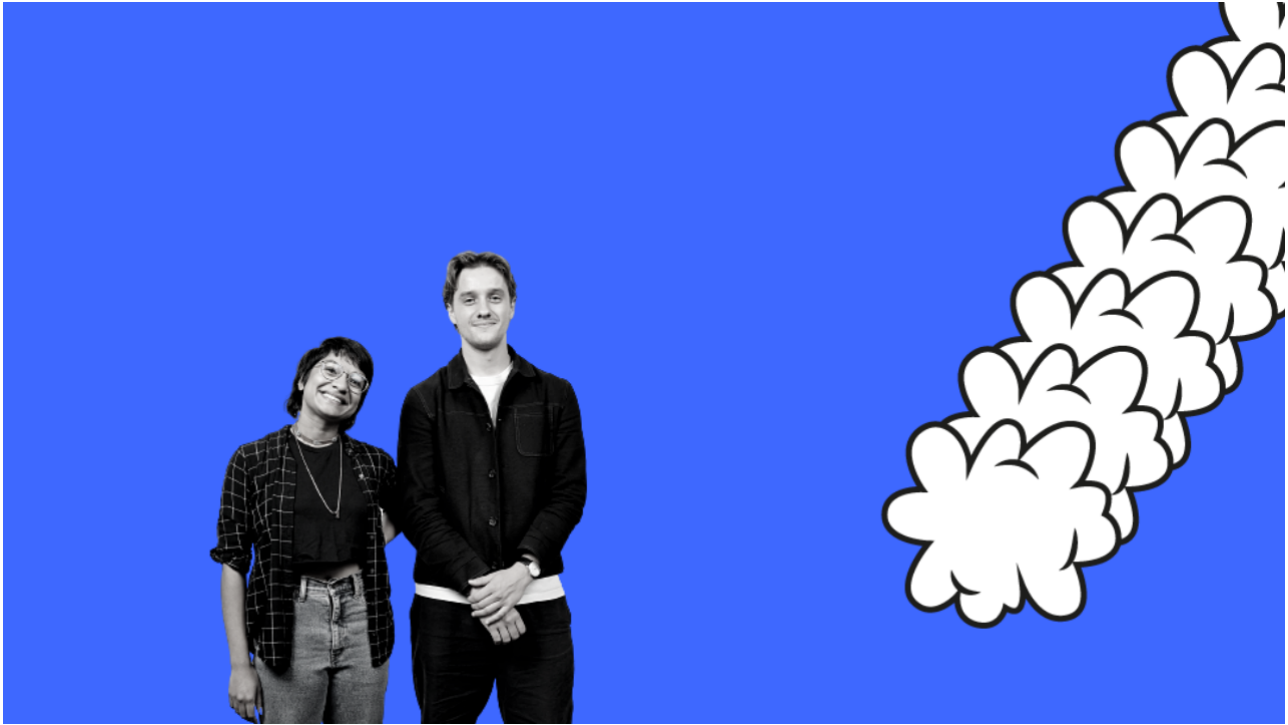
A written policy, although a good start, is not enough; your startup's culture must actively support it. Create a *psychologically safe environment* that actively celebrates when a staff member shares their needs. Be sure to thank them for their openness and find a way to accommodate them. As a founder, lead by example. Communicate your own feelings and delegate tasks when needed.

By fostering an environment where well-being conversations are encouraged, you're creating the foundation for a supportive workplace.

Lead by example

Startup leaders hold the power to influence change. Demonstrate your commitment to inclusivity by actively embracing neurodivergent individuals and showcasing their contributions. Explain why you are adopting certain policies and practices clearly, so people understand why they are important to your organisation's culture. Share your own story about why inclusivity is important to you and create safe spaces for others to do the same.

Authentic leadership sets the tone for a more inclusive atmosphere, encouraging everyone to value diversity as a core strength.



Read also

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Allocate budget for tools, training and awareness

Allocate budget to spend on tools and training to support your staff. Otter AI can help with transcription and note-taking, while screenreaders like Speechify turn text into speech. To help with burnout, offer to pay for or subsidise therapy or ADHD coaching.

Signpost your staff to the UK government's Access to Work scheme, which provides grants up to £62,900 per annum to support people with a physical or mental health condition or disability to take up or stay at work

Educate your team about neurodiversity's benefits and challenges. Organise training sessions throughout the year that shed light on this concept and provide effective strategies for collaboration.

Raising awareness helps debunk myths and biases, fostering a culture of understanding and empathy. There are several neurodiversity awareness-raising days throughout the year - among them ADHD Awareness Raising Month (October), Neurodiversity Celebration Week (March), Autism Awareness Month (April) and Autistic Pride Day (June) - use these days as a way to start conversations with your staff.

To keep the conversations up all year round, share interesting articles, books, films about neurodiversity on Slack. Read reports and academic papers, such as "[The Value of Dyslexia](#)", the "[Strengths and Abilities of Autistic People in the Workplace](#)" or "[Creativity in ADHD: Goal-Directed Motivation and Domain Specificity](#)". Or follow neurodiversity campaigners - such as [Ellie Middleton](#), [Leanne Maskell](#), [Dan Harris](#), [Abigail Agyei](#) and [Professor Amanda Kirby](#) - for bite-sized neurodiversity insights.



Read also

[From Vogue to ADHD Champion - my startup story](#)

Commit to continuous improvement

The startup journey is one of constant learning and growth. Regularly assess your practices and policies to ensure they align with the needs of your neurodivergent team members. Seek their input, address concerns and adapt accordingly. A dedication to continuous improvement shows your genuine commitment to creating an inclusive environment.

Integrating neurodiversity into your startup isn't just a feel-good measure; it's a strategic decision that can drive your success. It can help to unlock creativity, drive innovation and build a culture where people can flourish. By honing your hiring process, personalising solutions, and fostering a supportive environment, you're empowering neurodiverse individuals to contribute their unique talents to your startup's journey.

These are also processes and practices that your whole team will benefit from. In the startup arena, where innovation is essential, those who embrace neurodiversity and inclusivity will attract and retain the best talent and stand out as trailblazers of positive change.

Zareen Ali is the CEO and cofounder of Cogs AI.